

# Destiny's Child

by Fire

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Summary: What if, Ranma had been born during the 1600's, and on his visit to Jusenkyo, he fell into the spring of Drowned Young Girl.

Now, when he is splashed with cold water he turns into a 12 year old girl that never ages, and the only way for him to turn back is with nearly boiling water.

## 1. Swimming Lessons

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<br>This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the current

>author.<br>

>Thanks to my pre-readers:<br>Ranmas [ranmas@kode.net](mailto:ranmas@kode.net)

><br>

>This is a crossover between Ranma 12 and Sailor Moon. To make the two

>stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at <br>which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow

>my head in shame: please forgive.<br>

>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to its <br>story timeline...

><br>This story is dedicated to the letter F the numbers 1 and 2.

><br>

>Visit my website at<br>[dzillman@ozemail.com.au](mailto:dzillman@ozemail.com.au)

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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

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><br>What has gone before:

>Nothing yet, this is the first chapter.<br>

>-----<br>Swimming Lessons

>-----<br>

>It took little more than a single splash for Genma to realise that for <br>once he should have listened to the local guide. His sixteen year old

>son, his pride, his only reason for living in a cold, hard world was <br>now his daughter. When he saw the girl bearing an unmistakable

>resemblance to his son, he almost fell into the pool beneath him, which <br>would have meant getting wet for the second time this morning.

>Listening to the girl scream tore his heart and he leapt to the ground, <br>pulling her from the pool. When he saw the furry paw which he used, he

>bellowed in anger. <br>

>The Guide stepped up, looking splendid in his lacquered bamboo armour. <br>"Oh, sir, you fall into Nyanniichuan, Spring Of Drowned Young Girl.

>Very tragic story of girl who drown in spring 1500 year ago. Now <br>whoever fall into spring take body of young girl. Very tragic-- urk!"

><br>Checking that Ranma was all right, Genma grabbed the guide.

Ranma was

>just as shocked by the events as Genma, an acceptable excuse for some <br>trauma. Ranma was strong, and anyone could see that one day he would be

>a man among men. Lifting the large man another couple of inches off the <br>ground, Genma stared him in the eyes. 'How do we cure my son?' What

>came out was the guttural growls of a angry Panda.<br>

>The guide gurgled and gasped. He may have tried to answer, but the way <br>that Genma held him was slowly choking all the air from him. Genma

>relaxed his grip, and the guide tried again. "Oh, Mr Customer, sir. Is <br>no cure. Very tragic-- wargh!"

><br>This time the guide flew across half a dozen meters. No cure. That was

>what the guide said: no cure. Looking down at his son, he could <br>understand why the boy was weeping. Genma would have sacrificed his own

>life for the art, and he would have sacrificed his son's too.

<br>Sacrificing your manhood: that was another matter. All his life, Genma

>had told Ranma how women were weaker than men. They were there to be <br>treasured, cherished and protected: Ranma was a man, he should be the

>one doing the protecting. Even if Genma was a Panda, he was a male <br>Panda.

><br>Genma picked up his son... no, daughter... no, son... and carried her

>to the guide's hut. Perhaps some tea and some time to think. Genma had <br>a son to be proud of, and he was damned if any magic pool would take

>him away. 'I'm sorry, Ranma. So sorry. I will find a cure, Ranma. I <br>will.' "Growl, rargh rargh, brarr!"

><br>They ended staying there for two days. When Genma recovered from

his

>anger with guide, they discovered several pieces of important  
<br>information. The curse was activated and dismissed by water

>temperature. Each curse was water sensitive, and each chose it's own  
<br>focal temperature in some unknown way. Starting with cold water, the

>guide worked on Genma while Ranma watched. The guide would ladle  
some <br>water from his large cauldron and pour it on the animal. If the change

>did not occur, he would wait for the fire to heat the water, then  
try <br>again. It was not far above body temperature - say a warm  
bath - when

>Genma finally returned to human.<br>

>Ranma took a bit longer. Again they started with cold, then kept  
<br>working their way up. When the water was hot enough, Genma stole  
some

>for tea, and they all drank some while the small girl recovered. The  
<br>guide had dampened the fire and recommended that they wait for a  
while

>before continuing. Ranma nodded gratefully, then went outside to  
douse <br>her head with cold rain water to relieve the pain. When she  
returned,

>the red flush was beginning to fade from her skin, and they sat for  
<br>dinner.

><br>"Mr Customer, Sir. Is very tragic, but water to change you back  
must be

>very hot. You wish to continue this tomorrow?" Both Genma and Ranma  
<br>nodded. The path of a true Martial Artist is fraught with peril,  
and

>this was just another one. Ranma knew that he was a man, and would  
one <br>day make his father proud. If it meant that he needed to pour  
scalding

>water over himself, then that is what he would do.<br>

>The guide talked late into the night, explaining the origin of their  
<br>curses, and the tragic stories associated with them. He also told  
them

>of the true perils associated with the training grounds.<br>

>Despite the best efforts of the people which lived near here, the  
Kami <br>responsible for the pools seemed to choose their victims,  
and little

>could stop their destiny. Obstacles, fences and barricades might  
last <br>for years while no visitors came. Then in the space of day, a  
storm

>would destroy the fences, and when the weather cleared, someone new  
<br>would arrive to be cursed.

><br>If you were not destined to be cursed, you could never so much  
as

>approach the pools, let alone fall in by accident. The guide had  
seen a <br>party of travellers come to admire the place where a  
friend had been

>cursed. Because of rains that day, the ground was muddy and not one  
of <br>the people could come within ten meters of a spring without  
falling

>over. The person who had been cursed, they had seen the guide but  
had <br>not heard a word that was said... until it was too late.

><br>The Kami of the springs hungered for victims, so the Kami  
consumed.

>Maybe the gods just liked to have their sport.<br>  
>The guide did not know of any cures, but he could tell Genma of some  
<br>other people within the area which may. The way to find them was  
hard  
>and dangerous, certainly no place for a twelve year old girl.  
Looking <br>at the guide, Genma snorted, his son might look like a  
twelve year old  
>girl, but he was a true man in his heart. "Why are you the guide  
here? <br>Who provides your food? Why should you help us?"  
><br>The guide sighed and sucked on his pipe. "Oh, Mr Customer, Sir.  
Is very  
>tragic story. Twenty year ago, I fall into Spring Of Drowned  
Jusenkyo <br>Guide, now whenever I get splashed with cold water, I  
take on body and  
>soul of Jusenkyo guide which drown there 4000 year ago."<br>  
>"So why don't you pour some hot water on yourself, and leave this  
<br>place?"  
><br>The guide turned his head and pointed to the left side of his  
face.  
>Dimly, in the flickering fire light which they sat in, they could  
see <br>old scars. The scars were healed over now, but it looked like  
he had  
>been badly injured once. "I try, Mr Customer, I try. When first I  
get <br>this curse, I try. Heat water as hot as possible. Bubbling  
and  
>steaming, I pour it, burn self very badly, but I free. I no more  
<br>Jusenkyo Guide. It sunny day then, but as soon as I step outside,  
it  
>rain. I become Jusenkyo Guide again.<br>"Mr Customer, cursed springs  
need Guide, so springs get guide. Ever  
>since first guide drown in spring, 4000 year ago, new guide come and  
<br>replace when old guide die. Everyone nearby give me food,  
housing,  
>clothes so I stay alive. If I alive, no new Guide needed. Is good  
<br>reason why springs called cursed."  
><br>That night Ranma slept fitfully. The water they had been trying  
had  
>been painfully hot. Not hot enough to burn, but bad enough to be  
<br>painful. What if he was stuck like this for the rest of his life?  
There  
>were further things which the Guide had said. His spring was a  
special <br>one. The Guide had never known anyone to fall in it  
before. It was also  
>the only spring which included some mention of age in the curse. His  
<br>father had fallen into the spring of the Drowned Panda, a  
physical body  
>spring. There was the spring of the Drowned Virtuous Man, and the  
<br>spring of the Drowned Raging Hentai; these were mental springs  
  
>affecting only the mind of the person who fell. The spring of the  
<br>Drowned Jusenkyo Guide affected mind and body. His was the spring  
of  
>the Drowned \_Young\_ Girl. Whenever he entered his cursed form, he  
would <br>be a twelve year old girl.  
><br>When Ranma woke, it was to the thought of his real body ageing  
  
>invisibly under the curse. While he never aged a day as a girl, he  
<br>would one day fall over dead, his male body decayed, decrepit and  
no  
>longer able to sustain life.<br>

>A morning rain had reverted Genma to a panda, but heating the water for  
<br>tea and Ranma's testing allowed him to change back.  
Eventually the  
>water was hot enough to try again. The first time the guide tried,  
<br>Ranma gritted her teeth, and held the table when the painfully  
hot  
>water cascaded over her. The second time caused her to gasp in pain.  
<br>When she stayed a girl, Ranma dashed outside and dunked her head  
in the  
>rain barrel. Eventually the pain subsided, and she returned. <br>

>Genma looked on his daughter with pride. Ranma had shown dauntless  
<br>determination in the acquisition of the Art, and now he showed  
the same  
>determination in retrieving his manhood. What more could a father  
ask <br>of his son? The third try did work. While Ranma screamed in  
pain from  
>the near boiling water, he rose in stature, and again took his place  
in <br>the world of men.  
><br>With thanks to the Guide, the pair eventually headed off for the  
next  
>stop on the quest for Martial prowess. They lasted all of about four  
<br>hours before a midday shower soaked them to their skin. The small  
girl  
>and her panda wandered miserably through the forests of China.<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>When Genma led them into the Japanese town, he explained to Ranma  
the <br>latest reason that they were there. Genma was in his human  
form, but

>Ranma was still a young girl - it had been almost a week since he  
was <br>last a man. "Ranma, my boy. When I was your age, I trained  
under a

>great master with another man, Tendo Soun. My friend Soun has raised  
<br>his own family, and it was our intention that our clans should be

>joined to ensure the future of our Art. Son, today you gain a  
wife."<br>

>Ranma grabbed her father and threw the heavy set man end over end.

<br>Genma landed in a small peasant's hut, it's thatched roof shaking  
and

>dropping pieces from the impact. Pulling himself from the debris,  
Genma <br>heard his small, girl-shaped son curse him and saw him  
start to leave

>the town.<br>

>Running up to her, Genma took her shoulder and spun her around so he  
<br>could shout in her face. "Boy, this is a matter of family honour.  
By

>doing this we can ensure the survival of the School of Anything Goes  
<br>Martial Arts. It is your destiny and your duty!"

><br>Snarling, the little girl took the meaty hand which held her  
shoulder

>and turned under it. Applying a pain hold, she levered him up and  
<br>tossed him at the well. Bits of stone fell around him, but Genma  
again

>rose. Bellowing at the watching town's people, Genma chased after  
his <br>errant child. "Don't try and stop me Pop. I'm going back to  
China."

><br>With the time for subtlety over, Genma kicked at a tree,  
knocking off a

>large branch. With a heave, he threw it high in the air. All Ranma  
<br>noticed was her father charging in for another attack on her. The

>battle was brief and decisive: they had traded blows for all of five  
<br>seconds when the large branch landed exactly on Ranma's head,  
knocking  
>her cold. "There's more tricks to this old man than you know yet,  
boy." <br>

>The Saotome's arrival at the Tendo's was a quiet matter indeed.  
Ranma <br>was chastised and sullen, and Genma contemplative. The only  
noise was  
>the sounds of birds, some farm animals, and the smithy a few houses  
<br>back. Needless to say, Tendo Soun was delighted to see his old  
friend,  
>even if he did bring a young daughter. It had been years since they  
had <br>last met, and since letters were so expensive, it meant that  
the  
>friends had not been in contact for over a decade. <br>

>After a quick round of introductions, Soun and Genma sat down for a  
<br>private 'men's talk'. Kasumi and Nabiki, the eldest sisters  
retired  
>from the room, silk kimonos whispering quietly. Akane looked at the  
<br>young girl who had been introduced as Ranma. She was obviously

>uncultured from her time on the road. Apparently she thought she  
should <br>stay there while their parents discussed important  
matters. Before she  
>left the room, Akane spoke to her. "Hello, my name's Akane. We have  
a <br>dojo out the back where Father trains students. Would you like  
to see  
>it?" <br>

>The small girl nodded, so they retired from the room. Akane changed  
<br>into a Gi for training, and ushered the girl outside. The Tendo  
house  
>was quite opulent, a testament to the quality of her father's  
teaching. <br>Not only did they have their own bath house, but they  
also had a large  
>attached dojo for training. <br>

>When they sparred, Akane was stunned at the prowess which the child  
<br>displayed. Surely she could not be more than twelve, but the  
small girl  
>showed skill and experience far beyond her years. Eventually Akane  
<br>conceded defeat, and the two retired inside. After a bath, the  
family  
>and their guests gathered; the two patriarchs smiling at their  
<br>children. Soun Tendo was the first to speak, while Genma watched  
over  
>the kettle boiling on the open fire. <br>

>"Daughters, this is my dear old friend, Saotome Genma. Beside me, he  
is <br>the greatest practitioner of the Anything Goes School of  
Martial Arts.  
>When our two families are joined, the future of Art will be  
assured.<br>"Kasumi, as you are already promised to the village's  
healer, we shall  
>exempt you from this arrangement. Nabiki, between you and Akane, we  
<br>shall have a wife for Ranma."  
><br>The Tendo girls stared at him in shock, until they burst out  
laughing.  
>Not only was the idea of marrying a complete stranger ludicrous,  
Ranma <br>was both a little young, and quite obviously female. The

laughter died

>down when Genma stood and lifted the kettle. He walked over and stood <br>next to his daughter.

><br>"Akane, Nabiki: my son and I were tragically cursed while in pursuit of

>the finer points of Anything Goes. While we expanded the School's <br>knowledge and skills, we suffered greatly. While Ranma is cursed with

>the body of a girl, he is a man in his soul. His is a fitting heir to <br>the Tendo name."

><br>With that, he poured the scalding liquid on his child. Ranma shuddered

>and gasped in pain, but managed to hold in the scream. The sturdy, well <br>muscled man which he really was stood forth and was now apparent.

>Everyone was shocked at the magical transformation. Kasumi briefly made <br>a hex mark in the air, trying to ward her from whatever evil had

>possessed the small girl and made her a man.<br>

>When he had recovered, Ranma bowed to the girls again and re-introduced <br>himself. He had just settled back, sitting on his folded legs when

>Akane brought the table smashing down on him. "You pervert! We took a <br>bath together! How could you?"

><br>The fathers chuckled. So the match had been made that easily. They

>would hold the wedding tomorrow.<br>

>Two month's later, they were still fighting on a daily basis, and again <br>Ranma spent most of his time in his girl form. The pain of the hot

>water made changing a great burden: something not to be done casually. <br>Akane was a dynamo of aggression and bottled emotions. Each day they

>would fight, more often than not Akane would end up knocking the <br>smaller girl over the town and out into the surrounding forest.

><br>When Kasumi moved out to marry the town healer, the house became a

>louder and more dangerous place to live. Unrestrained by Kasumi's <br>caring touch and soothing words, the children's emotions would flare

>again and again, while their fathers watched from the sidelines.

Nabiki <br>relished the extortion of her sibling, especially once she had gained

>the favour of one of the Samurai which the Shogun employed to keep <br>peace in the town. Worse still, Akane would insist on cooking for days

>on end, until the entire house was bedridden from nausea and stomach <br>cramps.

><br>Nabiki's Samurai lived in a large house on the other side of the town,

>but they had met through a common tutor. The success of the Tendo dojo <br>had allowed Soun to spend freely, and he had bought his daughters the

>best education available for a girl. Ranma, Akane and Nabiki all <br>studied under the tutor, along with three other young adults from the

>town. Among these was a certain Kuno Tatewaki, an up and coming <br>Samurai.

><br>By the time Nabiki married Tatewaki, she was feeling like she

was

>doomed to become an old maid. Already her twentieth birthday had  
<br>passed, almost four years after she had first met the warrior of  
her

>dreams. When he finally proposed, Nabiki's cry of 'yes' could be  
heard <br>throughout the district. The wedding was a massive affair.  
Although he

>had appeared only slightly wealthy, Kuno had hidden his true value,  
<br>preferring to marry for love. His family was held in high esteem  
by the

>Shogun, and Nabiki was elevated to a noble status.<br>

>By the time of her wedding, Akane and Ranma had begun to settle some  
of <br>their differences. Now they could go hours without trading an  
insult,

>and sometimes a whole day would pass where they would not fight.<br>

>The Tendo dojo continued to grow in stature and fame. With the two  
<br>living masters of the Art of Anything Goes living and teaching  
there,

>people came from many kilometres, drawn by the fame it possessed.  
<br>

>It was in Ranma's twenty third winter that the plague struck their  
<br>town. It was fast acting and vicious, and anyone affected by it  
was

>almost certain to die. Within days of the first symptoms showing,  
the <br>afflicted would suffer from diarrhoea and vomiting. From  
there they

>would continue to suffer fluid loss until they eventually died.

Making <br>special exception for the crisis, Ranma had changed back  
into a man,

>still young and healthy. Much strength was needed for digging graves  
<br>and burning the infected houses.

><br>Three days after their first student had been affected, Ranma  
sat there

>cradling the man in his arms. Once Keiichi had been a great warrior.  
He <br>was training so that he would be worthy of being one of the  
Shogun's

>elite warriors. Now he was a withered husk. Tears fell down his  
cheeks <br>when Ranma looked up and spotted his wife. "Why does it  
have to happen?"

>He had such promise. His honour was impeccable. Why do the Kami  
claim <br>his life so young?"

><br>Moving the body from his arms Akane held her husband and offered  
her

>sympathy. With the pain of his curse, it was rare for them to hold  
each <br>other like this. While he made the sacrifice at least once a  
week (and

>often more) so they could try for an heir, Ranma seldom had time to  
<br>just hold her while he was a man. Gathering him in her arms,  
Akane

>lifted him to his feet and they left the dojo. <br>

>"Kasumi oneechan came past this morning. There are another twelve  
<br>people sick this week. What are we going to do?"

><br>Ranma patted her head. Every day she became more beautiful in  
his eyes,

>and when he thought of her looking like Keiichi, his heart was  
gripped <br>by an icy fist. "We will do what we must. Come, let us  
tell our

>fathers. It is time for the Tendo dojo to move to a new  
location."<br>



>The news was not met with happiness by the two ageing masters. Genma  
<br>still acted like a man half his age, but Soun had recently left  
the  
>tasks of training students to Genma and the children. Soun coughed  
once <br>and spoke with the firmness which came from being the  
family's leader  
>for decades. "No. This has been the site of the Tendo dojo since  
1432. <br>We will not desert it. This is where I was born. This is  
where I will  
>die."<br>  
>The next two weeks saw many of the town's inhabitants leave. Nabiki  
and <br>Tatewaki left when recalled by the district's Lord. They  
would never  
>abandon their position, but no criminal would risk their life in a  
<br>plague stricken town. Some of the students of the dojo left, but  
since  
>the new acknowledged Master of Anything Goes was teaching daily now,  
<br>most deemed it worthy of staying.  
><br>For the last few years it had been Genma and Akane which took  
most of  
>the classes. On occasion Ranma would teach or train with the  
students, <br>but only when he was in his man form. No respected  
warrior would  
>tolerate fighting with a twelve year old girl. Since he only aged  
when <br>he was a man, Ranma still looked young, around seventeen.  
Even so, his  
>skill in the Art had surpassed his father, and all bowed to him when  
he <br>entered the dojo. His consistent presence was a signal event  
in the  
>dojo.<br>  
>When Tendo Soun died from the plague that week, Ranma entered the  
dojo <br>with his body and placed him on a unlit pyre at the far  
wall. When the  
>class came in, they found the two masters of the Art kneeling and  
<br>facing them. Ranma eventually spoke when all of their students  
were in  
>attendance.<br>  
>"This town has been cursed by the Kami. It was Father's words that  
this <br>dojo would be where he died, and so it shall be. It is time  
for all of  
>us to obey the dictates of the Kami and leave this cursed town. We  
will <br>be re-establishing the dojo in the north. Almost three  
hundred  
>kilometres to the north of here there are a set of natural hot  
springs. <br>All who wish to learn are invited to go there in three  
years.  
>"All I ask is that you travel our nation and learn the Martial Arts.  
<br>When next we meet, you shall teach, and I shall learn. With your  
  
>assistance, we shall continue to develop the Anything Goes School of  
<br>Martial Arts."  
><br>Ranma and Akane held each other closely as the dojo burned.  
Genma stood  
>their and cried silent tears for his life long friend. Soun's  
funeral <br>pyre burned brightly in the night. With the fire went  
over a hundred  
>years of heritage, and the body of the greatest Sensei that decade.  
<br>Some may have known more, some may have been better fighters, but  
Soun  
>had been able to teach without peer. He had spread the Art to

hundreds  
of young people, and aided the Shogun's forces many times in teaching his greatest soldiers.  
Needless to say, it rained buckets for the following month. As a twelve year old girl, Ranma had speed, strength and endurance beyond anything which could be expected, but she was unable to match the pace set by the fully grown adults she travelled with. Consequently it took almost a whole month for the trio to reach their destination.

Building a new home was a labour of love. Ranma could use one of the boiling springs to change his form with ease, then he and Akane would smash trees or chop wood to build their new home. As a Panda, Genma had massive strength, which he used to move objects no human could hope to shift.  
In six months, the Tendo Dojo of Anything Goes Martial Arts was reborn.  
Despite the availability of easy hot water, and the frequent efforts of the loving couple, Akane was still without child.  
She stayed that way until the day Genma died. He was an old man of fifty two when it happened. Chibi-Ranma was preparing dinner, and Genma was digging in the garden in Panda form. With a look of amazement on his fuzzy face, the panda jerked upright and grabbed it's chest. When Genma spontaneously reverted to human form, Ranma raced out.

He grieved for two weeks at the loss of his father. Classes were cancelled, and it was only Akane's strength which brought him through. By this time, Akane had moved into the full bloom of maturity, and Ranma believed - and told her - every day she was everything to him. It was only when he lost his father did he truly appreciate what he had in his family. His father had been there for him every day of his life that he could remember. His sage advice and reckless, hearty humour had seemed such a burden before. Now their absence was a hole in his heart.  
As always, Akane filled that hole. In the months that passed following his father's death, the couple grew even closer. Akane too felt his loss, because there had always been the hope that one day she could present him with a grandchild. The one thing in her life which she should have been able to succeed at - especially given the fertility of her sisters - she was as much a failure as when she cooked.

People still came to train at the Tendo dojo, but as time passed, the numbers dropped. Akane was no longer able to handle the advanced classes she once could, and people refused to learn from 'Tendo Miyagi'  
the girl they said was her daughter.  
The year of 1641 brought it's own difficulty. Although a revered family, students no longer came to the dojo, unless it was to

learn the  
>wisdom of the elderly matriarch which lived there. As the rumours  
<br>spread of her isolation, bandits also learned. Since her only  
known  
>companions were her young granddaughter, and a young man, the  
obvious <br>conclusions were reached. If a man young enough to be her  
grandchild  
>was living - and by all accounts, sleeping - with her, it meant that  
he <br>must have some pressing reason. What reason could be more  
pressing than  
>the inheritance of whatever wealth she had obviously amassed?<br>

>'41 and '42 saw the defeat of not less than thirty bandits, who  
<br>attacked in groups of between two and ten. Quickly the story of  
the  
>legendary might of the young warrior prevented any more attempts on  
the <br>gold they believed was there.  
><br>Six years later, Ranma lay in his bed, cradling the frail form  
of his  
>wife. Until the last two years, Akane had aged gracefully and  
slowly. <br>Recently, the years had begun to show. While he looked  
like a nineteen  
>year old - never ageing in his cursed form - she showed every hour.  
Now <br>she lay in the cold bed. Not even the raging fire, or the  
proximity of  
>his body could warm her any more. The old woman looked at her young  
<br>husband.  
><br>"Ranma."  
><br>"I'm here, Akane. I'll always be here for you."  
><br>"I'm sorry, Ranma. So sorry. I failed you."  
><br>He smoothed her grey hair (it seemed like yesterday it was  
thick, and  
>so black it was almost blue). "Shhh. You never failed me. No man  
could <br>ever ask more from his wife than the love you have given  
me."  
><br>Akane coughed a couple of times and tightened her grip on his  
hand. She  
>hardly had the strength of a child now. "I always wanted to give you  
a <br>son. A son which would be as proud, and strong and handsome as  
you."  
><br>Gripping her tightly he kissed her face tenderly. "Akane, my  
life was  
>complete from the day I met you. You are my life and my soul. I will  
<br>love you always."  
><br>Akane repeated the words of love and rested. She died some time  
that  
>night.<br>

>Three days later, Ranma left the ashes of his heart and home. For  
<br>decades he had wished for the cure to his curse. Perhaps if he  
had been  
>a full husband to Akane, they could have had the child she wanted so  
<br>much. Now he simply wanted the cure so that he could be able to  
grow  
>old and join her some day.<br>

>---<br>End Of Chapter  
><br>  
><br>  
> <p><p>

## 2. Part IV, A New Hope

The characters contained within this story are owned by Takahashi Rumiko and Takeuchi Naoko. No infringement of copyright is intended. This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the current author.

Thanks to my pre-readers:

> Saran <saran@first.com.my><saran@first.com.my>

This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to its story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the letters A and K the number 8.

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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

It is now the mid 1600s, and Ranma must deal with the fact that Akane - his wife of the last 50 years - has just died of old age, and he still looks like an 18 year old.

Oh, yeah. If George Lucas can get away with calling Star Wars part 4, I can call Chapter 2 that also...

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> Part IV, A New Hope<br> -----

The small girl, eyes filled with pain beyond her years descended from the hills and walked to the coast. Wherever she went, she would seek the best fighters and the best teachers, and learn what she could. Medicine and fighting were the two goals in her life. With enough knowledge she could find a cure. When she was cured, she could grow old. One day becoming a lady, rather than a young girl. For if a girl can be come a lady, then a lady can become an elder, and one day she can join her family in the heavens. Ranma was not counting on any miracle cures, she would be perfectly happy - well, almost - if only she could age gracefully and naturally.

Every journey begins with but a single step. The journey to old age begins with being a lady. Ranma's goal had always been to be the greatest Martial Artist possible, and to be the manliest man

possible. Now he added that while a girl, he wanted to be a lady. She travelled Japan for three years searching for knowledge, questing for her elusive goal. As time passed, she came to realise that she was looking for the end of the journey, rather than the start.

Taking a boat to China, 'Tendo Yuki' headed for Jusenkyo.

\* \* \*

Yuki looked down on the pools of Jusenkyo and marvelled at how little they had changed in the last five decades. All the little bamboo poles were still there, looking as freshly cut as the day when she and her father had arrived the first time. Walking along the edge of the pools, she looked down into the cursed waters and wondered what spirit dwelt within the spring.

She was leaning over the water, trying to see into the depth when she heard a voice behind her. It was unmistakably the Guide, but he sounded depressed and resigned. "Oh, little Miss. You no go near cursed Spring, is very bad you fall in."

When Yuki turned and walked away from the spring, the Guide almost fell over. People never heard what the Guide was saying until it was too late. A dozen times the Guide had seen people come to Jusenkyo and had tried to warn them away: each time they had ignored him. If a person was doomed to be cursed, they would never notice the Guide's warnings until it was too late. When she was next to the Guide, Yuki looked up (compared to the massive figure of the Guide, Yuki's slender juvenile frame made it quite a way to look up).

"Don't worry about me. From what you told me, there's no danger of me ever falling into one of the springs."

"No! Little Miss, is very bad. You should not try. Go home now. Very tragic if you fall in."

Yuki laughed. "Oh, something like the Nyanniichuan, a very tragic story of young girl who drowned in the spring 1500 years ago?"

The Guide patted her on the back and led her into his hut. "Don't know where you hear story of Nyanniichuan, but no risk of that. Spring of Nyanniichuan destroyed fifty year ago. Spring dry up and vanish. No more spring of drowned young girl any more."

Yuki sat down and gasped in astonishment. All of the healers and priests she had spoken to over the last three years agreed on one thing. The best chance they would have to counter the curse would be if they had a sample of the cursed water to work with. If the spring was gone, even that hope was dashed. Seeing his guest in such a distraught state, the Guide took her inside, prepared tea and pressed a cup into her hands.

Seeing the small bowl of tea, Yuki looked up at the Guide and smiled. It's been so long, he probably doesn't recognise me. After sipping at the tea for a moment, Yuki decided it was time for a demonstration. Reaching past the Guide, she lifted the pot of hot water off the stove. When she poured it over her head and shuddered in pain, the Guide gave a short scream and stepped backwards. "No! Is not possible! Is no Nyanniichuan! You find hot spring of drowned boy?"

Ranma looked at the Guide and he seemed to be terrified out of his wits. "Calm down man! I've been here before, remember? You explained it all to me: the cursed springs, hot and cold water, the spring of drowned Jusenkyo Guide. Please, you have to remember. I need your help."

Still breathing hard, the Guide had backed to the other side of the room. Taking a few deep breaths, he finally managed to get himself under control. "I new Guide, only been here six year. You too young to have been cursed here before then. Where you get curse?"

Ranma sighed and took a sip of his tea. "I got cursed here fifty years ago, probably just before the Nyanniichuan dried up. While I was training with my father, he fell into the spring of the drowned panda. I fell into the spring of the drowned young girl."

The Guide shook his head, jowls wobbling. "Is no possible. You no more than nineteen. How you fall in spring of drowned girl?"

"Ah! There's your problem. It wasn't the spring of drowned girl. It was the spring of drowned young girl. Do you have any idea what it's like to spend almost every minute of the last five decades as a twelve year old girl?"

The Guide did not say a thing. He just turned his big shoulders and faced a wall. Ranma looked enviously at his back. Sure, he wasn't in great shape, but he was a man. Why should he be upset? Was... was he actually crying there? Slowly the guide turned around with some moist tracks down his cheeks and spoke softly. "I... I no understand. I fall in spring when I seventeen year old girl. Now I spend every day as fat old man. Once... Once I great warrior. Now I nothing more than fisherman. I collect people who fall in spring, try keep them alive. Never... Never get to live my life..."

When the Guide began to cry in earnest, Ranma became concerned. Stepping around the table he placed an arm around the Guide's shoulders and held him tight. It didn't take long before the Guide was clinging tightly to him, crying like the woman she was on the inside. The Guide's curse was the harshest of all the curses from Jusenkyo. If the Guide died, someone would quickly fall into the spring and be cursed to become the new Guide. For this reason, no-one would ever try and cure the Guide. All his food was provided, but none would stay with him, for to do so was to court the danger of the legendary cursed springs.

Worse still was what happened when a Guide tried to leave Jusenkyo. The Kami that watched the springs obviously wanted a Guide, and anybody that had been chosen and tried to leave the place was befallen by any number of horrible fates. From surrounding villages she had heard tales of Guides' friends catching all manner of diseases, towns burning to the ground around them and crops failing for miles. The Guide would never be harmed, but they would never be welcomed anywhere else in the world.

Ranma and the Guide talked long into the night. While the Guide had never heard of anyone ever being cured of their curse, he suspected it was possible. The magic of the springs was powerful, but surely there must be some limit. Although the hope was small, the Guide continually clung to the hope that some day there would be a cure and

he would be changed back into a girl. Already the best years of her life had been robbed away, and it seemed unlikely that would change, or she would ever be able to get them back.

As the fire in the hut was guttering low, Ranma spoke of his life and his goals. All he really wanted was to be able to grow old and die, to be with his beloved wife. He realised that suicide was possible, but that was just a coward's way of saying that they could not fight the way life was. Ranma was going to hang on to life until it was stolen from his grasp. He just wanted to remove the curse so that nature could take its toll. It hurt too much to see everyone and everything you loved grow old, wither and die while you watched through the eyes of a child.

Offering Ranma a place to stay, the two turned in for the night. Tomorrow they would again pool their knowledge. Perhaps they may have a clue to the cure that the other needed.

During the night it rained.

Needless to say, the roof above Ranma's head leaked slightly (and for the first time in years). When Ranma awoke it was as a she, not a he.

Over breakfast, the Guide told Ranma of his village, the Joketsuzoku. They were mighty Amazon warriors and would be happy to take in a girl as talented as Ranma. Since they lived close to the springs, they were also the most likely to be the ones which would have a cure. Ranma in turn told the Guide of his life and love with Akane. It was three years since she had died, but every day still started as a bleak and hopeless look at the future: alone, and eternally missing the one woman who he truly loved.

Eventually Ranma left for the Joketsuzoku. As she left the Guide's hut, she promised the Guide: 'If I ever find a cure for the curse, I will return here. You won't have to take the cure, but I promise you that I will offer it.'

While he walked down the hill, leaving the valley which held the springs, he wondered which was worse: being a man in a young girl's body, or being a girl in a man's body, and knowing you were losing your own life as time ticked by.

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> End Of Chapter <p>

### 3. Getting Out Stains With Soap

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This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the letters A, and K and the number 8.

Visit my website at  
> dzillman@ozemail.com.au<br>  
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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

Summary of Chapter 1:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

It is now the mid 1600s, and Ranma must deal with the fact that Akane - his wife of the last 50 years - has just died of old age, and he still looks like an 18 year old. He has just returned to Jusenkyo only to find that the Nyanniichuan has dried up. He also learned the true horrors of the history of the Spring Of Drowned Jusenkyo Guide.

Now he is going to a nearby tribe for help...

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> Getting Out Stains With Soap<br>

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Outside the gates to the village of the Joketsuzoku the black haired, pig tailed, young girl was challenged by two female sentries. When she said that she was a warrior from Japan who was seeking asylum within, they laughed. When Ranma demonstrated some Kata suited to the knowledge of a mid-level student of Anything Goes, one of them offered to escort him to a village elder.

The old woman - Deodorant - listened to Ranma story while appearing to nod off. She was a withered old woman, and must have been over a hundred years old, but she still moved with the grace of a warrior. When Ranma was finished the Matriarch's eyes snapped open and focused on the small girl. "Well, Little Miss. I have some trouble believing your story. After all, no-one has ever known the cursed springs to have a beneficial side. They are cursed springs after all. Would you object to a demonstration?"

Ranma grumbled and eventually assented. If she was going to get the help of these people, she would need to show them everything. Besides which, it was also the polite thing to do, since they were to be her hosts for the near future. As soon as Ranma nodded, Deodorant whipped a kettle from nowhere and splashed the boiling water on her. As soon as Ranma stopped thrashing from the shock of the heat, Deodorant sniggered.



"Your story is true, but you relax your guard too much to be a true warrior."

"Grrr. Old woman, I am the Master of the Tendo School of Anything Goes Martial Arts. The day I need to be afraid of a decrepit old woman like you is the day I need to return to the beginner's classes."

"A challenge! Very well, please attack me, young Ronin."

"Feh! I don't attack helpless old women."

Even as the words left his mouth, Deodorant leapt at him, swinging her staff. Ranma jumped back out of the tent, doing back flips until he had space to recover. When he righted himself he saw the entire village had come to watch them fight. How they go here so fast, he was not sure. Then he realised that the sentries would have alerted anyone nearby. They would have told their friends, and so on. Now rather than watching a little girl fight an old woman, they would see a fully grown man in his fighting prime wipe the floor with her.

Deodorant came out of the house and took a stance near him. Ranma also took his stance while the Matriarch told the rest of the village that there was no need to interfere. This was merely a training exercise. Either side would stop when unconsciousness was achieved, or when mercy was requested. Then she leapt.

For anyone it was quite a jump, for an old woman, it was a miracle. She was beside Ranma in an instant and began throwing punches. At first he just dodged and blocked, but when she increased the pressure, he began to realise that he would lose if he never retaliated. Dodging to the side, he began to send his own fists flying.

Unbelievably, the old woman managed to block this and still keep striking at him, and since he was not blocking as much, he started taking hits. Time to try a different tactic. Now Ranma switched styles and began to use a highly athletic form of combat. He bounced around and struck at the Matriarch constantly, forcing her to try to match his movement in an attempt to keep things equal.

He had scored two decent hits when the old lady's arms vanished in a blur of speed. In a moment he had been struck two dozen times, then thrown across the arena and into a water barrel. Coughing and spitting, Ranma-chan burst from the barrel. Although she was much smaller and weaker, she was just as fast, and a smaller target to hit.

Back and forth she ranged across the arena. This time Ranma was alert to the possibility of her speed punching attack, and leapt backward whenever she started. After ten minutes she had barely hit the Amazon leader, and she was a mass of bruises. The old woman had managed at least three pressure point strikes in that time too. She had returned the function of her left arm, but the supposedly debilitating pain strike had almost done her in. It was only slowly beginning to fade, and the Amazon was beginning to use her as a punching bag.

Ignoring the pain, Ranma focused her energies and leapt vertically. Aerial combat was a speciality of the Anything Goes School of Martial

Arts; if the old woman wanted to fight her up here, she was welcome. When the Amazon did not join her, Ranma began striking her own pressure points. The woman obviously knew some she did not, because the pain strike could not be totally relieved.

When Ranma touched down, she swayed for a moment then charged into battle. Everyone was obviously impressed by the jump, especially the old woman. For the next thirty seconds all she did was block and circle Ranma. Then, when Deodorant was finally close enough for Ranma to get some good blows in, she attacked. The next thing Ranma knew, she was flying high in the air, sucked up by a roaring, raging tornado.

Battered by debris, and bruised by the winds, Ranma fell to the ground. Looking up at the old woman, Ranma struggled to one knee. Seeing Ranma move, Deodorant almost fell over. She had defeated her pressure points, dodged the Chestnut Fist, and now she survived an Rising Dragon Defeat. Still this man turned girl continued to fight.

Ranma could barely move, but she crawled forwards. She had not lost a fight in three decades. Mercy or unconsciousness: there was no way she would ever ask for mercy. This time when the old woman used her speed punching technique, Ranma could not dodge.

Ranma's eyes flicked open and saw the ceiling of a small hut. Damn. Damn again. Beaten by an old woman. He was almost glad that his father was dead, for today would forever be a stain upon the Tendo name. How the School would ever be mentioned in public without ridicule was something he could not even guess at. What person would ever want to learn Anything Goes ever again? Its master was a twelve year old girl most of the time, and even when he was a grown man, old women could defeat him in fair combat.

Rolling over, Ranma saw Deodorant sitting on a chair. She was relieved to see that the old lady had a couple of bandages, and one arm was in a sling. She felt guilty about hurting her like that, but considering the way that she felt, it was nice to know that at least some of her blows had effect. With supreme effort, Ranma forced her way to her feet and stood shakily in front of the seated Matriarch, then bowed deeply. "Mistress, I humbly apologise for my presumption earlier."

Deodorant cackled. "Girl, there would be perhaps two women in this village which would have lasted as long as you did in that battle, and they know every move which I used against you. The Joketsuzoku Amazons have over 2700 years of history in fighting, and I am the living repository of that knowledge. If I had been defeated, I would have shamed our village. What you have done is to make us realise the value of the outside world. I have already discussed the matter with the other Elders of the village, and they would like you to stay and pass on your knowledge."

The girl's eyes closed to slits and she considered what she was being offered. "Mistress, your offer is most generous, but I have some problems with teaching. If I have to turn into a man before each lesson, I risk injury from the effect of such frequent boiling water. After all, who would want to take lessons from a twelve year old girl?"

"They will take lessons from you as a girl for three reasons: first, they saw you fight as a girl. They know you could beat most of them that way. And second: this is an amazon village. It's more likely they would object to taking lessons from a man. What does it matter if you look young? Do you judge me by my looks? And well you should not, for knowledge is my ally. And a powerful ally it is too. In a hundred years will you look so good?"

When they stopped chuckling, Ranma sobered. "Actually, yes. In 100 years, I will look exactly as I do today. I fell into the spring of the drowned young girl Mistress. That is why I came here: to try to find a cure for my curse."

Deodorant shook her head sadly. "Such a burden for one so young. I have grave news for you indeed my friend. There is no cure. In all my time living here, and in 2700 years of Amazon history, we have never heard of a cure. All I can offer you is a place to stay where you will be accepted for who you are. A place where your talents will never be wasted, and where the cornerstones of society are loyalty and sorority. I offer you an exchange: stay here and teach, and we will teach you in turn."

That statement bore thinking on. This was the closest village to the Cursed Training Grounds, and they had no cure. But the world was a large place... somewhere there would be magic powerful enough to cure him. He could not, would not, ever stop looking. "Mistress, your offer honours me. All I ask is that once I have taught you all I know, I may be free to leave some day. While I can stay here to learn and teach, I must someday find a cure; not just for myself, but for others who are affected."

"Ha, Ha! You are a sharp one! No blind agreement to stay here. I accept, a trade as it were. Since you are a teacher of the Art, I only ask that you refrain from teaching our secret techniques to others in China or those who may harm us."

She agreed, and Deodorant pushed her back onto the bed, insisting it was time to rest. Ranma could have a few days to rest, then it would be time for their exchange of knowledge to begin. Deodorant was just heading out the door when Ranma stopped her with a quiet word.

"Mistress, you said that there were three reasons why they would learn from me. You told me two, what is the third?"

Deodorant cackled as she left the room. Glancing back she favoured her new student with a smile. "Ha! A sharp one! Third reason is because I told them to do it, or else! HA HA HA HA HA HA!"

In the weeks which followed, Ranma found herself being accepted by the members of the tribe. The Amazons had taken in a number of women over the years, and it was this very policy of openness which had forged the village in the beginning. Although she needed to prove her abilities on a daily basis initially, Ranma realised that it was the first time since Akane's death that she had ever felt that she had a home.

Two months after he first arrived, Ranma changed back into a man. He had been in the form for twenty minutes when a group of angry looking armed women challenged him. Pleading his innocence, and dodging their

attacks, he led them through the village in a high speed game of chase. Having fully developed muscles was such a blessing that Ranma regretted the need to change back. After playing with them for almost an hour, Ranma leapt on top of a water trough, feet straddling it.

Seeing their prey cornered, the women circled him and began to advance. Looking at the back of the crowd, Ranma spotted Deodorant. With a smile and a wave, he brought his feet together and fell into the sun warmed water. Just as the villagers closed in, Ranma-chan popped her head out and gave them the cutest smile she could manage. "I did tell you who it was."

The beating she gave her was all in good fun too: nothing too serious, but enough for her to remember not to surprise people like that. Ranma didn't mind, when they finished brawling, everyone was laughing, splashing water, and having fun. Having a few hundred sisters could drive the loneliness from her heart for hours at a time.

That night, Ranma realised how much she missed Akane and cried herself to sleep.

It was winter when the Musk and the Joketsuzoku went to war again. It was a harsh winter, and the Musk leaders had decided that it would be easier to survive without their perpetual enemies. Villagers clashed and high powered martial artists waged war as only they could.

By the time winter was over, no clear winner had emerged, and dozens from each side were dead. Deodorant died in the fighting, and was succeeded by Liniment. Ranma began her own collection of trophies in the cellar under her house. For every Musk warrior she defeated in battle, she was awarded 50% of the gold or items he carried. In the weeks which followed the battle, Ranma would occasionally go down to the cellar and look at the prizes. All his life he had been a teacher, fighting only to defend his family. Now he had a bigger family, and fought to defend their future, as well as their present.

As Spring began, all the tribe gathered for one of their many celebrations. Life as a warrior was hard and short, so everyone learned to live life to the fullest. The Joketsuzoku partied as hard as they fought, and their idea of party games could kill lesser mortals. During the feasting (before the really serious drinking and gaming), Liniment stood on the table in the middle of the village and called everyone to order.

"When she was alive, Deodorant was one of our greatest warriors and one of the wisest elders. Before she died, she made a request of the council of Elders. Normally the Elders would think on such a request for a long time and debate it's merits. This request took little consideration. Tendo Ranma: for what you have done, you are no more. For the way you acted in front of our enemies, I, leader of the Joketsuzoku say this: you are NO MORE!"

A stunned silence hovered over the party. Everyone knew Ranma, she was a brave and valiant (if a little short) fighter. None could question her courage or ability. Why would she be cast out?

"You wonder why I would cast her out? I do not, for only one of our

village may be cast out. From this day fourth, Tendo Ranma is no more, she is now an honoured warrior of the Joketsuzoku! Rise, and let all people know and recognise you: Soap Onna Rope!"

Before she could move, the little girl was hoisted from her chair and carried on the shoulders of the winner of the village's yearly Martial Tournament. The party that night exceed any in Ranma's memory, and carried on until the first rays of light edged over the horizon.

It should be noted at this point that even though she was martial artist with tolerances and healing beyond the norm, it took four days to recover from the hang over.

Living in the Amazon village gave Soap Onna Rope very little encouragement to change back into a man on a regular basis. The few times that he did over the following years he was usually treated as a stranger, and always as a second class citizen.

Sometimes the idea of being stuck as a girl forever would become too much, and Soap would leave the village for several days to hike in the mountains. In times like these she would pitch camp, boil water and change back to a man. Then he would stay there and watch the sunset, and think of the things which were important, or more precisely, who was important. When the sun sank below the horizon, Ranma would train for a few hours, luxuriating in the strength, speed and toughness of his body.

After training, Ranma would invariably change back to a girl, and cry herself to sleep. The Kami had made it quite plain about what they thought of him trying to stay a man and die of old age. Any night he went to bed a man, it would rain. Somehow, some way, he would get wet: welcome back Soap Onna Rope.

Soap was a popular girl in the village. She was smart, incredibly skilled for her age, and had the fiery spirit of a true warrior. Everyone in the village knew about Jusenkyo, but most did not realise that Soap was one of the cursed individuals. Certainly they may have seen his original fight with Deodorant, but by now that was fading into the past. A decade without reminders would tend to dull the sharpest memories. To most of the villagers, Soap was simply a villager who had been cursed to never bloom into womanhood.

Soap was a small girl, but she had obviously halted her ageing on the verge of blooming. This fact did not escape the notice of the young boys in the village. Kids which had been babes in arms when Soap first entered the village were now in her apparent age group. As one of her duties in the village, Soap was teaching an intermediate course in unarmed combat. Intermediate was a fuzzy sort of word, since it implied that there was a beginners and an advanced course. This was not really the case: everyone learned to fight from their family as soon as they could walk, and when you were good enough, you stopped the intermediate classes for private tuition.

After her class finished for the day, Soap watched with pride as the children moved off to relax for a while. Training was well and good, but even Amazons needed to rest some times. She was turning to go back to her own hut when one of her students came up to her and stood uncertainly beside her. Pretending not to notice him, she did a few stretches and let him sweat. Just when it looked like his nerve would

fail him, Soap turned slightly and 'happened' to gain a glimpse.

"Oh, hello there Brush. I didn't notice you. Can I help you with something?"

Brush blushed all the way to the roots of his hair. 'She remembers my name!' "Err, Soap, I was wondering... would... would you like to take a walk?"

Shrugging, Soap looked around. No more classes today, don't have to see Liniment until tonight. "Sure, Brush. Lead on."

Walking beside her, Brush bubbled with excitement. He knew she was older than she looked, especially since she was the one teaching the class, not taking it. However, he was fourteen, so she could not be much older than him. They walked along the streets for a while, and gradually Brush led them to the main entrance to village. When they got there, Brush went and had a chat to his sister who was one of the two sentries.

Figuring that Brush was trying to arrange for the two of them to be outside without an adult, Soap wandered over to the other sentry. Smiling happily, the sentry gave the smaller girl a quick hug: Soap had been her unarmed combat instructor five years ago. "What's up with Brush?"

Soap glanced over her shoulder. "Don't know. He seemed a bit nervous. I figure he wants to ask out one of the girls in the class and wants to get some good advice from the teacher."

"Makes sense. Well, no Musk raiders have been reported recently, but there's a wolf pack somewhere to the south at the moment, so be careful or head north."

"Gotcha. Whoops, here he comes. I'll report in when we return."

Waving goodbye, Soap followed Brush, gently leading them north on one of the trails leading from the village. Brush spoke up, his voice filled with pride. "That was my big sister back there. She said she'd cover for me if I went for a walk with one of the girls from the class. I guess she figures I can keep the two of us safe."

"Probably, there shouldn't be anything out there at the moment to worry about. Did you tell her who you were taking?"

"No, she trusts me. She tells me that I fight so well I should start looking for a girl to be my wife sometime soon."

Soap smiled inwardly. She was right! He did want advice on one of the girls in the class. Probably wanted a bit of advice on their fighting styles. Nothing wrong with a little advance planning. "Probably a good idea. The younger you marry, the more time you can spend with the woman you love. Did you have anyone in mind?"

They stopped by a small stream. In the sunlight the water bubbled and gurgled happily. After looking at the ground for a while, Brush summoned his courage and looked into Soap's large purple eyes. "Soap

Onna Rope... I would like to challenge you for marriage."

Immediately Soap went as rigid as a board and turned away from the boy. 'He doesn't know. He doesn't know. There's no need to kill him. There's no need to kill him.' Clenching and unclenching her fists beside her, she fought to bring her emotions under control. Bad enough that he would have the audacity to ask another guy out - 'he doesn't know' - but he happened to choose a day only a week after the anniversary of his marriage - 'there's no need to kill him'.

Finally she turned around and stared up at the boy. He was an inch or two taller, and looked a year or two older. Probably figures it will be an even fight, but he might wear me down... "Brush... You really don't know about me do you?"

"Not much, I've heard you're older than you look, but you can't be that much older. Now come on, I challenged you: let's fight."

Soap sighed and backed into a fighting stance. She knew the laws of the village when she became an Amazon, she just hadn't realised that this one would apply to her. "All right. I accept your challenge. All I ask is that if I win, you don't mention this to anyone for a week. After that... it's up to you."

Brush nodded once, then charged her, doing a leap kick. Needless to say, it went through empty space. When Brush recovered and turned, Soap was there, hands behind her back, trying to look innocent. He came in again, this time going for a series of punches and leg sweeps.

While Soap hopped and dodged, she examined his style. Reasonably fast, but not tight enough. Dropping under a left hook, she berated herself. A student's ability reflected on the teacher, and he had just left an opening wide enough to drive a cart through. Have to revise that in class. Hop over the leg sweep. Come on boy, get your arm down, your side is exposed.

After a dozen attacks, Soap gave a little jump and waved at Brush from ten meters away. "I hope your not getting tired. I haven't finished stretching yet!"

Brush puffed a few times and advanced on her again. Perhaps this wasn't the best idea. She had evaded everything he had, and made it look easy. But Brush had fought young girls before, he knew if he got a couple of blows in against someone as small as her, she would be on the ground permanently. He was still five meters away when Soap looked at him and smiled. "Goodnight."

Ceiling. Brush was sure that there were not any ceilings in this part of the forest. Sitting up, he looked around. Hmm, definitely one of the huts in the village... but I don't recognise it. The furniture (what little there was) was all simple. Just the mattress he was on, a table, some chairs, and a few cupboards. One of the chairs held a smiling man. Tall, dark hair, tied back like Soap's... he could almost be her brother. That was probably who he was, but Brush was sure that Soap did not have any relatives.

"Brush. Good to see you awake. My real name is Tendo Ranma, but when I'm in the village most people call me Soap Onna Rope."

Brush laughed. Soap was a girl, and quite a nice looking one at that. A bit small, and still young looking, but undeniably a girl. She was also at least a foot shorter than Ranma, and probably half his weight. Ranma stood up and wandered over to where Brush was sitting. When he was close enough, he crouched down and looked the boy in the eyes. Brush reached out for the glass of water Ranma carried, but he easily held it away. "This is why I didn't want you to challenge me."

With a splash, Ranma shrunk. The loose robe he had been wearing seemed to balloon on the small form, and in under a second the clear purple eyes of Soap stared at him, where once Ranma's blue eyes had been. "Jusenkyo. I'm a guy, Brush. Most people here don't know or care because I can't change back often. I thought you ought to know... just in case you wanted to try again. Follow me for a minute, I want to show you something."

Small tears trickled down the side of Brush's face. He was disgraced. Not only had he failed in his first challenge for marriage, but he had challenged a man. One of his best friends, his teacher, the girl he liked most in the whole village was a man. By this time tomorrow, he would be lucky if he could ever show his face in public again.

After a few moments he realised that Soap was waiting for him. She had pushed aside a floor mat and had lifted up a trapdoor. This was a reasonably common thing in Amazon houses, hidden cellars, false ceilings, false backs in cupboards, fake chimneys, even fake plumbing. If you have something valuable, you hide it; not from other villagers, but from thieves or attackers.

Getting off his backside, Brush followed Soap underground and into a series of locked rooms, radiating out from a central chamber. All he could think was it would take a lot of time and effort to dig this through the rock. When she opened one door, he trudged through the fell to his knees in awe. The entire room was filled with gold, jewels and ornate weapons and armour.

"You realise that when we fight another village or go to war, a winner gets to keep some of the loot, the spoils of victory? All this is mine. Every knife, every coin. Every item you see here I took from the dead hand of an enemy of the Joketsuzoku who I killed with my bare hands. Bandits, Musk, wild animals, traitors or regular Chinese army. I just wanted you to know there is a reason you lost today."

Soap ushered the star struck boy from her hoard and closed the door. Next she opened the opposite door. "This is a shrine Brush. It's a Japanese tradition, to help you remember someone dear to you. I would trade everything in that room for one more minute with Akane."

Akane was the woman in the pictures which adorned the shrine. Ranma had paid the best artist in the village to paint them and work until they matched the face in his memory. One large and two smaller portraits of the woman he loved. The large one was Akane in the prime of her beauty, say late twenties. The smaller ones were when she was a girl, and when she was older. In each she held the same beauty for Ranma. A tear trickled down Soap's cheek just looking at her.



"Your mother?"

"MY WIFE! When I married her she looked just like that. And when she died, that's her in the other picture. Find someone, Brush, and grow old with them. I got cursed, and thirteen years ago I watched my wife die of old age. Not a day goes by when I do not miss her. Believe me Brush, there is nothing worse than watching, day-by-day, year-by-year as the woman you love dies before your eyes and there is nothing you can do."

Soap took a deep breath, bowed to the pictures and lead Brush back up to the main room. "I never really expected to marry anyone here, either as a man or a woman. I'm afraid you caught me by surprise today. When I brought you back here, we came over the wall, so no-one knows we were here. I don't want people to know you challenged me, because they might try too. You probably don't want people to know either. I'll get us back out of here, then we can come in the normal way."

Brush looked at his teacher - possibly even his friend - with hope. "We just went for a walk?"

"We just went for a walk."

Class the next day was a bit different. Soap knew she needed to do something which would keep the wolves at bay, or more people would challenge her. "Today, I'm going to show you what it means to be a warrior of the village! Along with your sisters, and a few brothers, I have defended this village against all who would attack it. For practice today, I shall demonstrate how much you have to learn before you can consider yourself suitable to teach the advanced pupils. I currently teach three advanced warriors. Use any technique, and any blunt weapon. The person who defeats me and takes the tiara I am wearing gets to keep it."

The prize in question was a simple gold tiara which Soap had won when the village had killed a group of slavers which had travelled nearby. A pretty trinket, and a suitable reward if anyone was good enough. Even attacking twelve to one, she expected to keep it easily.

After arming themselves with staves, bokken and bonbori, the students attacked as one. She let them play for five minutes, simple dodging and blocking all their attacks. Then she struck back.

Soap not only beat them, she demolished them. Before rendering one of them unconscious, she would give them a quick work over. Nothing permanent, and no special techniques, just enough bruises to show them who was boss, and who was the better fighter.

The next day she gave the tiara to the one girl who had actually hit her.

Liniment was not entirely pleased with the little demonstration. She didn't mind the fact that Soap was showing off, or the fact that she beat up so many students. Liniment just disliked the fact that she was one of the best healers in the village, and she would have to prepare lots more pain killers and healing ointments. As punishment to Soap, she began to instruct her as a healer.

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> End of Chapter <p>

#### 4. When The Cat Is Away, The Mice Will Play

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This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the number 4 and the letter Q.

Thanks to my pre-reader:

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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

It is now the mid 1600s, and Ranma must deal with the fact that Akane - his wife of the last 50 years - has just died of old age, and he still looks like an 18 year old. He has just returned to Jusenkyo only to find that the Nyanniichuan has dried up. He also learned the true horrors of the history of the Spring Of Drowned Jusenkyo Guide. Since then, he has moved to the village of the Joketsuzoku. Now he lives there with his friend Brush, the first boy to have proposed to his girl side for marriage.

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> When The Cat Is Away, The Mice Will Play<br>

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Five years later it was Soap Onna Rope who was the midwife delivering Brush's wife's baby. It was a beautiful child, bright red, and coughing and crying from the first moments. Every sign was there of a healthy baby. Soap smiled as she showed the new-born warrior to Brush's wife. "You have a perfect little baby girl. What will you name her?"

The girl smiled, holding Brush with one arm and the baby with the other.

"Cologne."

In all his years, Ranma had known a great many children. The village had lots of them, they were an essential part of its future. Akane had often been upset at her own failure to have children, given the fact that both her sisters had broods of six. The Tendo sisters and their children had visited them several times, especially in the early days when the Dojo was still in the same town that they were. Ranma liked children: there was something special about them, an energy, a naivete, an endless joy which swept up everyone nearby.

Somehow, Cologne was special. She was the first person Ranma had known from the very moment of their birth. Ranma knew Cologne from the very first seconds of life, even before she started to breath. When Cologne was born, it was Ranma's hands which were the first sensations which she would ever feel. When Ranma was taking the baby girl to her mother, it was Ranma's face which Cologne saw the first time she ever opened her eyes.

From the instant Ranma saw her wrinkled head, Ranma loved Cologne like her own daughter. The fact that the father was one of her best friends in the Amazon village also help matters. Over the next few days, Ranma spent as much time with little Cologne as either of her parents.

Although she eventually picked up her duties in the village again, Soap spent every spare moment with the child and happy couple. Even when she was not with them, she was thinking about them. Brush was excited by the fact that his best friend loved his child so much. After Ranma's revelation, they had become much closer. Closer to the point where Brush realised the huge burden of suffering and loss which Ranma carried. Brush sincerely hoped that Ranma / Soap's love for Cologne would help her get over the loss of his wife, and begin to accept the future.

The prospect of having Soap as a beloved Aunt was not purely selfless of course. Soap was considered one of the premier warriors in the village, if not the best. Since she was still considered a maiden, she was eligible (and encouraged) to enter the yearly Martial Tournament. Every year she refused, and it was only on years where a particularly egotistical girl took the competition did anyone not suggest that Ranma could be the winner if she desired. The protection and education which was offered by having such a friend for your child could not be overlooked in this harsh world.

Similarly, the fact that Soap was one of the village's designated Mistress Healers meant free and instant medical attention. From the day Cologne could walk, Soap was there, helping her, training her. If Cologne fell, or was hurt in a fight, Soap would appear in moments with encouragement or, if needed, first aid.

Soap had just finished taping a bandage onto the little six year old's arm when her father appeared. "What happened to her this time?"

Cologne looked up at her father and smiled. "Lotion and I were

fighting a monster in the cave, Daddy. Then it woke up and it got mad, so we ran back here. I tripped over and cut my arm. Are we going to hunt the monster, Auntie Soap?"

Soap patted the head of the little girl. "No, not today. Cologne-chan, you take Lotion back to Mummy. I need to have a talk to your Daddy."

Cologne nodded her head, dark hair bobbing cutely as she tried to look serious. When she was out of earshot, Soap turned to Brush and snarled. "I realise we can't guard them all the time, but when I find out who was on gate duty, we're going to have a little 'chat'."

Brush did not need to look into her eyes to see the fire that they held. The forest was filled with all sorts of dangerous animals. The villagers liked it that way: free protection from strangers, and it helped to keep them on their toes. On the other hand, the forest was not the place for six year olds to be playing unattended.

"Are we going to look for the monster?"

"Damn right. If we have a bear moving in for hibernation, we need to tell everyone where not to go. Could also be important if winter's bad."

Brush grunted and the two set off for the cave that Cologne and Lotion had described to Soap. They were approaching the cave when Brush restarted the conversation. "What was that name you used earlier? Cologne-chan?"

"Yeah. I'm originally Japanese, and I remembered that's what we used to call each other when we were young, and when we got older, that's what we called the cute little kids."

There was not much more that could be said really. Most people could tell that Soap had some sort of ethnic background, but when you considered that she had looked twelve for the last twenty years, minor details began to fall by the wayside.

In silence the pair entered the cave and looked around. It was fairly deep, and quite dry inside. A cave like this would be the perfect retreat for almost any form of animal. Something as dangerous as a bear would love this cave for the winter, or even the most dangerous animal out there: man. They had searched the cave and found nothing. The kids had probably scared it as badly as it scared them.

They were almost back at the entrance to the cave when a low growl reached them. Instantly both of them paused. Holding up a hand, Soap advanced alone. In moments she was back, stumbling backwards, shaking in fear, her expressive eyes large and flicking around the room for any sign of escape. Following her lead, Brush backed up.

If the mighty Soap Onna Rope was scared, then it must be some sort of horrid demon which was approaching. He had seen Soap fearlessly charge into a crowd of Musk warriors two years ago during a minor border incursion, so he knew there was no-one - man or beast - which she feared. They had reached the back of the cave, retreating ahead of the sounds, and Brush said a silent prayer hoping for the safety of his family.

When the scent of wet fur reached them, Brush knew his demise must be at hand. Soap was starting to gibber in fear beside him, and was almost trying to push through the rock. Whatever demon this was, merely to see it must induce fear, sufficient to cripple the greatest Amazon he knew. When the creature finally stepped into view, he almost collapsed.

Sure, it was unusual to see a Bengal Tiger in this part of China, but he knew a dozen warriors which could slay the animal without breaking a sweat, and while Soap was definitely one of them, he was not. Dropping into a combat stance, Brush prepared to meet his maker with as any Amazon should. Needless to say, his respect for his friend fell even further when she began to scream like the little girl she obviously was.

The tiger advanced. It could smell their fear, and it knew that it had not eaten in several days. If these were the inhabitants of its new home, they would soon be lunch. With a snarl and a roar, it leapt at Brush, knocking the man to one side with a massive paw. Despite his speed and training, Brush took almost the full impact of the blow, all he had managed to do was prevent the inevitable by not being opened up by the massive claws. Turning to him, he could smell the beast's fetid carnivore breath as it arrived to deal the final blow.

The great cat had just raised its deadly paw when a snarling challenge was called out from beside it. Man and beast turned and to see the small form of Soap, crouched on the ground on all fours. Her mouth was open and hissing, while she held one curled hand off the ground in a similar posture to the tiger. All trace of fear had been washed from her face as she advanced on the tiger.

Brush and tiger both realised the futility of Soap's attempt to fool the animal. From that position, no human could muster the speed or strength to fight effectively. The fact that a forty kilo girl was less than a third the size of the cat did nothing to improve the image which she was trying to project. Before Brush could intervene, both the combatants jumped at each other.

They met in mid-air, and became a rolling, boiling ball of blood, fur and limbs. Shrill screams of pain filled the air, while blood blossomed around the cave, coating everything a brilliant red. By the time Brush had regained his feet so he could leap into the fray, he was dodging the pieces of flesh which flew from the still snarling whirlwind in the middle of the cave.

As a terrifying roar split the air, he lowered his arms and saw a blood covered Soap perched on what little remained of the tiger. Despite the fact that she was covered head to toe in blood and other bits of undetermined nature, Soap seemed unhurt. Brush moved towards his friend, only to halt when he saw the look of pure savage, vicious bloodlust he backed off. Soap leaned down and took a bite at the carcass near her hands, picking up the cat in her mouth.

Following the Soap out of the cave, Brush could only wonder at what demon now possessed his friend. He knew that Soap was no ordinary girl, and that she was stronger than most men, but what sort of strength allowed you to carry a hundred kilos of tiger corpse in your teeth? His concern grew as they approached their village. After seeing

Soap fight before, and seeing how quickly she managed to kill the tiger, he seriously wondered how many people would die before they could kill whatever was controlling Soap.

They reached the wooden picket which surrounded the village, and Soap simply jumped to the top and then inside. The fence was designed to keep everyone but the strongest of animals or warrior from the village, and she had just jumped it while burdened. Yelling for help, Brush rushed for the entry gate. There was no way he could climb the stockade in time to help, all he could do was pass the news as quickly as possible.

By the time he had arrived at the gate and passed inwards, the commotion was already starting. A blood covered girl carrying a tiger in her mouth through the centre of the village is not something that you normally see. A large crowd had gathered to watch what was going on when Soap arrived at the hut where Cologne and Lotion were playing. The two children looked up and squealed when they saw their friend. All Neko-Soap did was drop her burden at Cologne's feet and purr.

Little Cologne gave a short squeal of terror and backed away, running for her mother who was standing in the doorway of their home. The woman looked down at her terrified daughter, and at the blood covered girl and frowned. "Soap, what on earth do you think your doing?"

Soap did not respond, but only bounced over the corpse and rubbed one bloody flank up against the little girl. "Soap! Stop this immediately! Your terrifying little Cologne!"

Still ignoring the adult, Soap was getting into Cologne's game. As the scared girl would retreat around her mother, Soap would follow her. Some of the Amazons were getting sufficiently concerned about the girl's odd behaviour that they started to advance. Some of the weapon wielding women had almost come within fighting distance when Liniment's aged but authoritative voice rang out over the village. "Hold! No one move!"

Instantly everyone within earshot stopped moving. Even Soap stopped, but that was because she had managed to catch up with Cologne and was happily rubbing herself against the small girl. By the time Liniment made her way to the hut, Cologne was tentatively patting Soap, wiping the matted hair back from her face, and getting a deep purr from her friend. Seeing another friend, Soap sat on Cologne's feet and began to work on cleaning her hands, licking off the blood.

Liniment was almost ready to offer an explanation when Brush appeared. The man was frantic with worry, especially when he saw the deranged girl so close to his daughter. Pushing his way through the crowd, he was preparing to rescue his daughter when Liniment pressed a paralysis Shiatsu point on his neck.

"Now that we are all here, does anyone know how this happened?"

From where he lay at her feet, Brush gave an explanation of the events in the cave. Nodding contentedly to the story, Liniment waved the villagers in close and revealed all.

"It appears that Soap has been trained in the Cat Fist. This is an

awesome Martial Arts technique, which endows the user with almost super human speed and strength. The only drawbacks are the fact that almost no-one can survive the training, and it results in at least a temporary loss of sanity. Sometimes the loss is permanent. Neither we nor the Musk bother using the Cat Fist to train our warriors. It will only work on the best warriors, and even then many are driven insane. In times past, many strong, valiant warriors were lost, sacrificing their minds to the cat first, only few ever yielding the promised power. Some fool has trained Soap in the Cat Fist. It makes her completely terrified of all cats, even the smallest kitten. It can also make her into a deranged killer if she or those she loves are threatened. For now, everyone is quite safe. If no-one makes any sudden moves towards her, and no-one threatens her or the child, she should be quite harmless. Remember, now she has the mind of a cat. Treat her like a cat, and all will be well."

Liniment looked at the ground for a moment, then back at the girl who she had invested so much time and effort in training.

"Having a villager in the grip of the Cat Fist is not something we can take lightly, however. While she is safe now, she is also unpredictable, and extremely dangerous if she is aroused. We will allow her three days of rest. If she has not recovered in that time... then more desperate measures may need to be taken."

Cologne and Brush managed to wipe most of the blood off Soap in the course of the next hour. Just as they were almost finished with most of the job, Neko-Soap apparently decided that it had received enough petting for the while, and it was time for some serious playing around. Cologne had just finished cleaning Soap's hair, and was working on tying it back when Soap stuck both her arms around her and sent both of them tumbling out of the hut with a loud cry of "Miyaaa!"

All the adults who had been watching immediately charged outside, prepared to offer their lives to save the little girl, but by the time they got there, it was too late to change the outcome. Soap and Cologne had become inextricably locked in a vigorous game of tag. Sighing in relief, they watched as the two jumped around the yard, both making cat sounds as they chased, rolled and frolicked.

It didn't take too long for the grown ups to feel tired just watching the two play. If there was something to be climbed over, jumped on, or crawled under, the two managed to find it. Drawing on the almost limitless energy that only small children and elite martial artists under the Neko-ken have, they played for almost two hours straight before returning to the house and collapsing in an exhausted, boneless heap on the floor.

Seeing little Cologne-chan lying on her sleeping mat, half covered by the larger form of Soap, Brush almost felt concern. But after watching them play and be around each other all afternoon, Brush began to wonder if there was actually any safer place in the world for his daughter. Soap could obviously defend her from any sort of attack, and her devotion to his daughter was quite unmistakable. Shaking his head, Brush settled down to have his own rest.

He was still sitting in a chair, half dozing when around midnight a cry of distress rent the air. "CAT! CAT!"

Immediately awake, he saw Soap sitting there, looking around with a lost expression on her face. After a moment she realised she was holding the still sleeping Cologne, she replaced her on the mat, and wandered over to her friend. Whispering, Soap asked the obvious question. "How did I get here? What happened to the c-c-c-cat?"

"What do you remember?"

"I just remember being in the cave and that... that... thing coming at us... How did I get here?"

Brush chuckled quietly. "That 'thing' happened to be a Bengal Tiger, about the biggest cat you're likely to see."

Soap shuddered. "I don't care how big it was, it's still a c-c-c-c... you know. I... um... have this little fear of... THEM. Did I black out? Did you bring me back here?"

"Yes and no. You blacked out, but you came back here under your own power. Do you know a Martial Arts technique called the Neko-ken?"

Soap pondered for a moment. "Oh, yeah! Sure I do. Pops tried to train me in it when I was really young. He said it was a complete failure. Just drove me nuts for a while and gave me this great fear of c-c-c-ca... THEM."

"Liniment said he succeeded. Yesterday when you blacked out, you actually went into some sort of strange cat-like state, and tore the tiger to pieces. When we got you back here, we cleaned you up, and let you play with Cologne for a while. You fell asleep about five in the afternoon. Hasn't this sort of thing happened to you before?"

"Not really. My family always knew about my phobia, so they made sure there were never any... any of THEM around. Akane told me I'd black out like this three or four times in the past when a cat did get to me for long enough, but she always looked after me."

Soap wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and tried to pull her mind away from the happiness of the past.

Over the next week, people stayed cautious around Soap, but she never relapsed. In time, all was forgotten, and people moved on. Cologne was a bit upset at the loss of her playmate, but eventually Soap relented and offered to play tag with her as a normal girl. While cats were never a popular pet in the village, they became slightly less popular, and were never seen near Soap.

One of the irrefutable laws of the universe was the fact that children grow up. Girls become young ladies, and young ladies become women. It hardly seemed to be the blink of an eye; all too soon Cologne was sixteen and winning the yearly Martial Tournament. In the month prior to it, Soap had handed most of her duties over to other women, and was training Cologne personally. It was a close match, but when the new challenger won, everyone went berserk. The food was the offered prize, but the real prize was the esteem which everyone held for you, and the fact that you joined the elders' table in the feast that night.



The next day, Cologne sought out Soap and took the younger girl for a walk. It was time for them to discuss things, and it was probably best not to say everything in the open. Everyone who had been Soap's age when she entered the village was starting to show the signs of age. The little kids who had been babes in arms were now the current generation of adults in the village. Brush and his generation were now respected adults, bearing children, and passing their knowledge on to the youngsters.

Soap on the other hand was still twelve. She still had the big, innocent eyes; the open smile, and the childish looks. When she entered she had been a teacher of the children, and a student of the elders. For almost a decade, she had been privy to almost all the tribes secrets, and could hold her own against any three of the best students in the village.

She was also watching as everything important in life passed her by.

Near a small stream - on a patch of level ground Soap remembered well from a whole generation ago - Cologne stopped them and faced Soap.

"Your thinking of leaving, aren't you?"

Soap looked at her feet, then back up at the girl grown into a woman. Cologne had grown into a beautiful young lady, and Ranma envied the boy who would one day be her husband. "Yes. If I stay here much longer, I'll be watching all my old friends die. Again. So many of them are already gone. War, animals, accidents. It's only the lucky and the cautions which are left now. I've already watched as my friends grew old and died once. I don't want to watch it again."

Cologne held her hands in front of her and pleaded. "Please stay. We need you here. There is so much you can teach us. We need you... I need you. You're my best friend in the whole village."

Soap sighed. "Thank you Cologne-chan. I think you and your Dad are my best friends too. But I don't want to stay here and watch my best friends grow old and die. I'm sorry."

"Is there nothing I can say that could convince you to stay?"

"No."

"Then, Tendo Ranma. I challenge you. If you loose, you shall be my husband, and stay here until one of us dies."

Soap almost fell over. It had been almost a year since she had last changed into her Ranma form. She still felt the same inside, she was a guy inside, but not outside. She could have sworn that almost no-one in the village still believed that she was actually a man. For heaven's sake, she consistently had to beat off marriage challenges from the young men. She only ever had to do it once, but it almost seemed to have become a rite of passage for many boys: 'thou shalt be beaten to a pulp by Soap for proposing'.

"You can't mean this, Cologne-chan. You've never even seen me as a man, I could be hideously ugly. I couldn't even be a proper father to any children. What sort of a father changes into a twelve year old girl the first time he has a bath? How did you even know?"

Cologne shook her head. "I have my ways. And yes, I do mean this. The village needs you. I need you. You need us. I've seen you walking around. This is just a place to live to you, it's not a home. We're your friends, not your family. I want you to be part of a family. Whatever happened, you've suffered enough. It's time to move on. I want you to be part of the future here. You mean too much to all of us."

"I can't. I'm sorry Cologne-chan. I've already had a wife, and every day I wish she was still alive. I don't want to be saying the same thing about you in another fifty years. I'm sorry. I have to go. I'm going to talk to Liniment soon. I'll probably leave in another month or two."

Cologne chuckled. "You'll only leave if you can win the challenge. Let's boil some water. I want to see this Tendo Ranma who I've just proposed to."

Soap laughed at that one too. "Oh, I'll be leaving. You're a hundred years to soon to beat me, Cologne-chan."

When they fought, it was as man and woman. It was also as brief as expected. Even without resorting to special attacks which Cologne had no hope of matching, he defeated her quickly. In the end, Ranma held his best friend in a strangle hold, and gently applied a pain hold on her right arm until she capitulated.

"What? No beating me black and blue?"

"Feh! I don't mind if girls challenge me... I'm a guy. I just try and discourage the guys from trying."

After admitting defeat, the two talked for a long time. They talked of the future, their hopes and aspirations. After two hours they headed back to the village. Cologne looked at Ranma in concern. "Are you sure we don't need to find some water? People might be a little... confused... to say the least."

Ranma laughed, and to prove her point, it began to rain only minutes from the village. "The Kami hate me, Cologne-chan. They do. In the last fifteen years, the longest I've stayed a man has been five hours straight. Changing into a girl is not something I need to put much effort into."

A month and a half later, Ranma did leave. It was an emotional departure, for everybody. The Amazon village had been his home for over thirty years and been a source of comfort, help and happiness when he was at his lowest. For the villagers, Soap was one of them. She was a teacher and a friend, a loyal soldier in battle, and a revered healer when they were sick and injured.

The older people in the village remembered Ranma's arrival, and they realised that some day he may wish to leave, but there was not one person in the village which did not wish he would stay. Many of the unmarried young men fancied the cute little Soap Onna Rope... even if

she did look rather young. The older men, and most of the women were sad at the loss of a friend. She was strong and sure of herself, a true Amazon. Beyond that, she was also a brilliant teacher and warrior, and a person who could be trusted in any circumstance... especially with the honour of their husbands and sons.

The village lined up and watched as she prepared for her pilgrimage. The elders had refused to accept that she would leave them forever. Unless you were cast out, you were an Amazon until the day you died. So rather than Soap leaving to find a new home, she was going in search of knowledge, secure in the knowledge that she would be able to return at any time. On the way down the line of friends and adopted family, Soap stopped and spoke, saying goodbye to each person individually.

Thirty years as a warrior, and thirty years of donations for healing, had left Soap very rich. Too rich for her to possibly take all her wealth and the many books she possessed. As she moved down the line, she passed out some of the pretty gold and jewellery to the children she knew. The adults received more practical items, salves or potions, advice, or even just a hug and kiss for those who no gift could express her friendship.

Eventually there were only two people left in the line. Soap stepped up to Liniment and held the old woman tightly. Liniment was growing old and it was showing: now when she held Soap, their heights were equal, age having shrunken her once proud frame. For over twenty years Liniment had been Soap's teacher of the healing and martial arts. Holding her close, Soap said the only words which mattered to her.

"Thank you. I will try and be worthy of what you have taught me. And you were right in what you said earlier. No matter how long I wander, no matter where I go: this will always be my home, and you will always be my family."

Liniment tried to say something - anything - but eventually she just nodded and gave a weak smile. Then she turned away, rubbing her face. Amazon's do not cry... especially the Matriarch.

Soap and Cologne held each other also. Cologne was still a girl in the eyes of the village, so she was happy enough to do the crying for both of them. After a moment, Soap brushed a tear from her cheek and looked at her pretty face.

"You were almost a daughter to me, and then you were my best friend. I always wanted to be able to teach you everything I knew, but every day I look at you and I'm frightened of what it would be like when you grow up. I don't want to be there the day that they bury you Cologne-chan. That would kill me. Instead, I'm going to find a cure for my curse, and we can grow old together... What do you say?"

Cologne sniffed and nodded. Soap took her hands looked up at her face. "You've got great potential, Cologne, almost as much as I did. Don't waste it waiting for me. I want you to have my house. It is a house suitable for the Matriarch you'll be some day. All my books and scrolls are there, the ones I am taking are just copies. Use them well. Live life, and be proud of yourself and your village. Always remember the Joketsuzoku have 2700 years of history backing them

up."

With that, Soap Onna Rope left the Amazon village.

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> End of Chapter <p>

## 5. Welcome To The Big, Wide, World

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This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the letters I and M and the number 24.96.

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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

It is now the mid 1600s, and Ranma must deal with the fact that Akane - his wife of the last 50 years - has died of old age, and he still looks like an 18 year old. After returning to Jusenkyo to find that the Nyanniichuan had dried up, he lived with the Amazons for several decades. However, all good things come to an end, and rather than see another generation of his friends grow old and die, Ranma has left the village.

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> Welcome To The Big, Wide, World<br>

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As the small girl struggled up the mountain side, Tendo Ranma pondered her future. All she owned, she carried on her back. True, she carried a weight heavier than any twelve year old should possibly be able to lift, but it was all her worldly belongings. A century of muscle strengthening and Ki focusing allowed her to move a fairly

weighty quantity of possessions.

As she walk through the lush forest, Ranma catalogued what she had. A change of clothes, and some cold weather gear. Some knives and a pot for camping. A week of rice and dried meat. A small book filled with meticulous summaries of magic and herbalism. The book of Amazon law. A sealed, waterproof case holding three pictures of Akane. And slightly over a hundred kilos of gold and jewels.

Travelling light was no reason to travel poor.

Ranma spent almost two years in the vast forests of China. She wandered most days, idly trekking first north, then heading east, having decided to find the ocean. By the time she reached the northern reaches of the Pacific Ocean, Ranma was firmly convinced that the life of isolation and meditation was definitely the wrong way to find a cure.

Ranma admitted that he had never been the brightest student around. While he could learn most things fairly well, unless it was fighting, he had few new ideas. At least after two years of trying, no-one could say that he had not tried being a wandering hermit or scholar. Best to leave no stone unturned. There would be a cure to this curse, it was only a matter of finding it.

Heading south along the coast of China, Ranma tried the studious life in the cities. While there, she would sometimes convert some of her wealth into investments. Living off the income of a small trading company made life easy, and let her hire the scholars or mages she sought.

This passed another six years, washed away in the sea of time. People's faces changed, cities changed, but only three things stayed the same: big business, big taxes, and little Ranma.

Eight years from her home wasted, and nothing to show for it. In all her time, no new ideas had occurred, no mystics with an infallible cure, no new hope. All that had happened was that a few careless investments had bloomed, and she had accidentally doubled her money. As if that mattered.

Leaving his investments in the care of managers, Ranma again hit the road. He had considered going to Japan, land of his birth, but that felt too much like defeat. To return now, uncured, would be to acknowledge his failure. He would be no better than a wandering Ronin, drifting and worthless, eternally cursed and worthless. He would not, could not, return now. Not until the day he could face his deceased wife with pride, and say that for all eternity he was the man he could not be for her in life.

Southwest it was. To India, a land of mystics and meditative wise men.

It was an older, wiser and much humbler Tendo Ranma which walked north over a century later. The Indian mystics were vast libraries of spiritual knowledge, and he had learnt all that was available. Ranma's already potent battle aura had soared to level levels, and then shrunk again as she learned to control her aura and hide it from view.

When Ranma walked north, strength buoyed by Ki, she radiated no more aura than any normal person. Unless she was truly aroused, Ranma could shield her spiritual strength from even the most observant.

Stopping through China on the way to her next destination, Ranma disposed of more of her accumulated gold. Living frugally for so long had dampened her lust for material wealth, even though it had been small to start with. Since the trading companies she had invested with earlier still existed, she turned their control, and most of her assets over to a group of investors. They would hold her money in perpetual trust and investment until she or her descendants chose to withdraw it.

Properly prepared for the aesthetic life she expected, Ranma headed north to Tibet.

For many years she moved from place to place. A decade here, or a few months there, she sought a cure, and learned all that was available on spiritualism and Martial Arts. Then she found the Tewon Monastery.

It was situated at the top of the sharp spire, in the middle of a set of inhospitable, rocky mountains. The first question Ranma had asked when she found out it's existence was 'why there', the answer was simple: no-one would visit there unless they were very serious. Monks hate tourists.

The second question which occurred was 'what could they possibly eat there'. Ranma wondered this as she ascended the mountain side. The spire was a difficult climb, even for someone as experienced as her. The rock was almost vertical in most places, and the rough edges were as sharp as glass, ready to cut the hands and feet of the unwary. Carrying a pack and walking staff only made things harder.

Eventually Ranma made it to the top and looked around. The top of the spire was almost a perfect circle, and would have been about three hundred meters across. It was not the fact that people lived here which shocked her the most. It was not even the large and ornate stone temples - they may have been carved from the spire before it was levelled.

The most impressive aspect of the entire monastery was the symbolic entryway. The entry was comprised of three massive wooden poles, two vertically, and one horizontally at the top. Each pole must have been over half a meter thick, and five meters long, and must have weighted over a ton. There could never have been trees like that up here, and even though she had walked here, Ranma had not seen any suitably sized trees for three days walk. How could the possibly have moved them here?

Recovering from her awe, Ranma looked for signs of life, and eventually found a meditating Monk sitting directly below the entry. When she approached, the Monk looked up and offered her a seat on the ground. When Ranma was seated, she bowed and spoke. "Wise One, I have come seeking knowledge and a cure for my curse. May I have your assistance?"

The elderly Monk nodded his head. "Yes, young one. Any who are

willing may learn all we can teach. I will begin your first lesson when you get me a bucket of water from the well."

Ranma looked around, then did a quick search of the village. Returning, she sat in front of the Monk. "Wise One, where is the well so that I might get you the water?"

"Down that hill, and two kilometres east."

"WHAT? How am I supposed to get a bucket of water up this forsaken mountain?"

The Monk smiled and looked her squarely in the eye. "That is your first lesson. All will be explained when you bring the water."

It took her two months just to complete that first task. Every time she ascended the mountain, the old Monk was sitting there. After a while, she wondered what he ate and drank. That was lesson five.

Over time Ranma learned much. If the Indians had taught her the depth of spirituality, then what the Tibetans taught her was nothing short of magic.

The Monks taught her to see the world as it really was, and to see her curse as a blessing, and not something to be countered. As the decades rolled by, Ranma learned the ancient and hidden secrets, known only to those who dedicated their lives to the pursuit of such things. Lesson twelve revealed the meaning of human existence in the greater scheme of things... a lot of the strange events in her life made sense after having that explained.

Much time had passed when Ranma felt a presence moving up the side of the mountain. Sitting in the entry way, she rested her Tibetan staff next to her. Ranma waited for the weary seeker of wisdom to approach her, time was something she had ample of. Despite her apparent age, she could hear the respect in the seeker's voice as he asked. "Wise One, I come to the monastery seeking knowledge and understanding. Is there someone here who can teach me?"

The Ranma nodded her head. "Yes, young one. Any who are willing may learn all we can teach. I will begin your first lesson when you get me a bucket of water from the well."

The seeker looked around, then did a quick search of the village. Returning, he sat in front of Ranma. "Wise One, where is the well so that I might get you the water?"

It was when those words were spoken that Ranma came to a revelation. She had failed. She had given in. She had spent decades in this useless place, no closer to a cure than before she arrived. Truly she had gained much knowledge, but she had forsaken who she was. No longer was she the man that Akane had married all those long years ago. Now she was a stranger. A stranger who had relinquished all pretences at searching for a cure.

"Wise One? Where is the well?"

"Where indeed? I shall show you the well. When you return, another will continue your education. This is no longer my place."

Without a backwards glance, without a wave goodbye, Ranma lead the seeker of knowledge to the edge of the cliff and looked at him. "You may come with me, but I fear you will not like the path I travel. The well is two kilometres east."

With that, she gripped her staff in one hand, stepped off the edge and plummeted to the ground, hundreds of meters below. Moments before becoming one with the rocky floor of the valley, Ranma called the words 'RAY WING!', and continued to walk, apparently ignoring both the fall and the laws of physics. Perhaps not everything she had learned was useless. Turning east she went home, to the year of 1939.

Reaching China, she discovered there was a war. From Ranma's perspective, it was a civil war. When he was born, it was in Japan, and there he had been raised. His wife, the woman he missed every day of his life was there, her spirit a part of that proud nation. China was the land which had become his home. China was the land of the Joketsuzoku. It was the land of Deodorant, Liniment, Brush, Cologne and many other Amazons. It was the land that had taken him in when the pain of loss in Japan was too strong to live with.

Ranma turned east. There was no way he could fight in a war between China and Japan. They were both his family, and he owed his loyalties to them both. If he could not go home to find himself, to restore the inner youth which he had sacrificed for wisdom, then he must again travel.

The land was cold, and the languages strange when she again stopped travelling. Ranma had found what he sought. His own cause, so close to futility after three centuries of searching, was worn and decayed. When he found the Polish partisans, when he saw the horrors of the German invaders, and the equal horror of their Russian liberators, he found a new cause.

Ranma the Rebel. It became a name to fear. Apparently a small girl, this rebel leader had risen through the ranks of the Polish partisans, fighting for the freedom of a country and a people she never knew. The girl was a master of disguise and evasion; despite the best the authorities could do, she could never be caught. Even after a traitor identified the tavern in which she was staying one night, she managed to slip out somehow, to all evidence having escaped with the men released.

With the return to his first true love, fighting, Ranma again found his inner child. He found the strength to move on, to fight again. To continue the search, and to succeed where success was needed most.

All fights have winners and losers. As much as Ranma hated to admit it, this was one fight which his side had lost. After three decades of resistance, his compatriots were worn out, and no longer willing to continue the fight. That was Ranma's cue to leave: when she was the only person who called for action, who rallied for resistance, then the fight was over. The same night she realised this, she said goodbye to her few surviving friends, and vanished forever from that part of the world.

Even as he walked back across Europe and China he thought on what he



had learned there. The Indian and Tibetan knowledge was grand, but it was not who he was. War and guns were also not who he was. He was a fighter and a teacher. He was a man who fought fairly and openly with hands and feet, not hiding behind a barrel.

Ranma knew that he could have fought differently in Poland. With his knowledge, he could even return to the Joketsuzoku and finally rid them of the Musk - assuming they were still fighting. But that was not how he wanted to be. After searching and excelling so long, he wanted to be normal. He wanted normal problems, and normal answers. Even though he had been raised in violent times, Poland had shown him the futility of killing.

Fighting was fine, but to kill another human being... Nothing was accomplished. Friends or family would take up the cause, and you would be back where you started. However, the man you fight with today, may become tomorrow's ally when differences are reconciled. It was time to start again. Time to shed the years of his searching, and regain his lost youth. From there, he would search anew, his quest until the end of time.

The very minute that his foot touched Japanese soil - as soon as he left the gang plank - Ranma wondered why he had ever left Japan. When he walked away from the dock and into a park, he literally knelt down and kissed the ground of the land that he was born in. In the fight to free himself from the curse, he had been knocked down, but he had stood up again. He realised that there could be no defeat, only surrender.

Even as he stood in the park and rallied against the Kami, they showed their opinion and sent rain. Changing to a girl, Ranma laughed and danced in the light rain, revelling in the feelings of happiness. It was good to be home. Home for the holiday, home to rest and think. Somewhere to stay and regain her zest for life. Somewhere that she was the local, a person who belonged.

It was also time to visit her wife.

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> End Of Chapter <p>

## 6. Ranma Makes A Friend

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This story is dedicated to the letters B and R and the number 57.

Visit my website at  
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http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire

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> \<br> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

Through almost four hundred years of history, Ranma has endured. He has been a husband to Akane and a second mother to children in the Joketsuzoku. From monk to revolutionary, Ranma has travelled much of Asia and Europe. At long last he has returned to Japan.

-----<br>> Ranma Makes A Friend<br> -----

Modern technology was a wonderful thing. It took less than a day for Ranma to make her way to the lands where she and Akane had once had their home and dojo. When she reached the hot springs, she was so angered by the public baths that had been erected there that she almost tore the place to the ground. How dare they? This place was a shrine to his wife! Every rock, every blade of grass, every spring was a record of their love, and these people had walked all over it!

Filled with anger, little Ranma stalked into the main reception of the hot springs resort. Looking around for the owner, she spread her senses, and searched. In moments, her anger left her: all around, all she could feel were people's happiness. Sounds drifted to her ears: children and adults laughing, happy couples in quiet conversation, lovers walking hand in hand.

Looking around, Ranma felt like crying. This was still a business, and it was there for profit; but the customers were there to be happy. When Ranma left his home centuries earlier, he had made a pyre of his home. The ashes of his wife were scattered over the springs which had brought her such joy in her lifetime. Now, everyday, people came from around the country to share that joy. Ranma could not think of a more beautiful tribute to his wife.

Even as a tear started to form in the corner of her eye, an attendant came up and smiled nicely. "Hello, little lady. Have you lost your parents?"

Ranma pulled herself together. Crying in a public place! Hardly fitting behaviour for a real man, an Amazon, a mystic, a Monk or a rebel. No, it was perfectly acceptable behaviour for him to cry at his wife's grave. "No, Just remembering. There is a particular pool I would like to hire. Who can I see to make a booking?"

The attendant smiled indulgently. Such a brave little girl. All alone in a big building, just her pack and caved staff. Even as she looked around, she could not see the girl's parents, but she knew they would be watching from the shadows. The little girl was probably trying to do her best to help mummy and daddy by doing the booking for them. At the reception desk she sat down and pulled out a guide to the springs that they had.

Her petite customer studied it for a while, and eventually pointed to a spring on the far side of the compound. "That one please. I want to book it for the whole night."

The attendant was rather surprised. Most of the public springs were around thirty to sixty degrees, that one managed to average at least seventy. "Are you sure that's the one your parents want? This one here has a similar name, and it's much nicer to soak in."

Ranma sighed. It could be bad in China, but here people treated you like a child, just because you looked like one. Hauling her pack onto her lap, she searched through it and brought out a handful of notes. The exchange rates had been a bit poor, but she had converted quite a large amount of Chinese and Polish funds. Dumping the pile of notes on the table, she covered them with a small hand.

"Listen, lady. I might look like a kid, but I'm not, OK? My 'mummy' and 'daddy' have been dead longer than you've been alive. I know how hot the spring is, and I want it for the whole night. Just me. No-one else. Screens up for privacy. Just little old me. Understand?"

The attendant clamed up at this. She might be only twenty, but she was quite a bit older then this girl. If she thought she could talk to her in that fashion! Standing up she walked around the desk and took the girl's arm. With a slight pull, she tried to lift the girl off her seat. "Enough of that language, young lady! Come on, we're going to find your parents right now!"

Needless to say, this was not the recommended way of securing the co-operation of a Joketsuzoku Amazon, who happened to be the living master of the School of Anything Goes Martial Arts. Focusing her Ki to anchor her position, she replied with a voice as cold as ice. "You will remove your hand now, or I will remove it from your arm."

The attendant was too preoccupied with trying to shift the incredibly heavy child to notice what she was saying, or even how she was saying it. She had reached the point where Ranma's temper was almost at an end, and she was visibly yanking and dragging on the girl when her manager arrived. Ranma instant fixed his gaze and let a small fraction of her battle aura appear in her eyes.

"I was trying to hire a spring for my personal use when this woman assaulted me. Unless you wish further consequences, I suggest you remove her instantly."

After that little display things went much more smoothly. The attendant was whisked off, and the quantities of money easily allowed her to hire the spring of her choice. As soon as she was at the spring, Ranma heated some water and changed to a man.

Stepping into the spring, Ranma moaned at the heat, and let the tears trickle down his face. This spring had always been Akane's favourite.

While it was painfully hot, it was also warm enough not to trigger his curse. It was a place that they could spend their time together as man and woman, secure that even rain and snow would not interrupt. You couldn't spend too long in the spring before hyperthermia began to set in, but every minute was precious when the Kami conspired against you.

Ranma spent almost the whole night either soaking in the pool, or cooling off in the chilly air beside it. By the time the morning came around, he felt more at peace than he had at any time while he was studying relaxation as a Monk. Somehow, after spending this time with the ghosts of his past, he had come to accept them more. With the rising of the sun, Ranma took one last soak then climbed out. A splash of cold water later, and she was ready to take on the world.

Buying a map of Japan, Ranma settled in a cafe and looked over her options. She could go south-west, and try to track down where her family had ended up. The last she had heard about Kasumi and Nabiki, they had both moved to Kyushu. It was a big island, but she had plenty of time. Eventually she discarded that idea. No one would know her, and so many generations had passed she would hardly be related to whomever she found.

Patting her little bird-type pet, she leaned back and blew out a deep breath. If you cannot re-establish your roots, make new ones. Selecting the largest city on the map, she paid for her drink, put her pet Takuhi on her shoulder and went off to Tokyo.

In two weeks she started elementary school. In four weeks she was changing schools. She had been this age for so long she had forgotten what it was like for children. In two weeks she had discovered that her academic standing was far below par. Her general knowledge and specialised knowledge in other fields was tremendous, but her knowledge of recent history, or contemporary authors was terrible. Hardly surprising, she had left Japan long before what was considered either recent or modern history. As for current events...

Her other main problem was a little more physical. You average twelve year old is not inclined to jump into fourth story windows, or jog twenty kilometres before breakfast. For that matter, most of the girls in her class would not be able to beat the entire Martial Arts club (instructor included), or be able to do most of the swim training underwater, holding their breath. Most students also tended to have parents who had not been dead for four hundred plus years.

In short, two weeks of school made her a freak and an outcast. Backwards mentally, and overdeveloped physically, she was shunned. The Saturday of the second week, she left school and never returned. Selecting another school at random, she plotted her strategy.

Before she enrolled, Ranma got herself a foster family. They were a nice couple, and they were thrilled when social workers sent Ranma - or Tendo Ai as she told people. Officially she was now a girl, a surprisingly developed nine and a half, and ready to start school. She had studied some children in a park, and had a fair idea how they played, and what they were capable of physically.

School turned out to be a fun and exciting place. She was one the

biggest kids in the class for the first year or two, then she was normal, and by the time she was in elementary school, people were talking to her 'parents' about vitamins and grow supplements, she was looking a little small for fourteen.

Ai's best friends were the daughter of a local Okonomiyaki chef, and another girl whose mother was a sole parent, working in a pharmacy to support the girl. It had started out innocently enough, Ukyo (the budding chef) had invited Ai and Kikyo over for dinner. Kikyo could not make it that first night, so Ukyo had challenged Ai to a Martial Arts tournament to see who could get the first Okonomiyaki her father made.

Ukyo's father, a big bearded man, had watched in pride as his little daughter battled with the bigger girl. They were both ten, and enthusiastic fighters. His daughter had put on a good show, and had eventually lost to the other girl's strength and development. He chuckled when he handed little Ai the food, and thought how things would change in years to come.

The next day Kikyo joined them for dinner, and while three sets of parents watched from near the yatai, the little kids fought with happy abandon. Covered in dust and grinning ear to ear, the three had proudly walked up to the yatai and demanded that he cook three at once: it was a draw.

The three were almost inseparable for the next few years. Kikyo lost interest in Martial Arts, and instead became an artist. Ucchan and Aichan continued to fight for their food every time they ate, either at Ukyo's or Ai's. When the girls were all thirteen, it was Kikyo who caught the first glimpse of Ranma's boy form. Over the last couple of years Ranma had noticed that the Kami did not seem to be paying him as much attention, he seemed to be able to spend much more time as a guy, maybe as much as five percent of a week.

In the weeks after being spotted, Ukyo and Kikyo took to waking up early and trying to watch the handsome man as he went for his morning walk and workout in the park. Ranma was in the middle of a Kata one morning when he called them from their hiding place and introduced himself. Giving them the name Tendo Ranma, the girls leapt to the conclusion that he was Ai's big brother. He did not try and disillusion them, preferring to have them as friends than scaring them away as some kind of perverted freak.

By the time the trio had reached fifteen and entered high school, Ai's age was beginning to show seriously, and Ranma was beginning to think it was time to move on. Ukyo was having other ideas. She had met the man of her dreams, and would soon be old enough to marry him. While Ranma looked a few years older, he was an ideal catch: cute, strong, and friendly. Either as a pair or a trio, the friends had gone out together many times, and Ukyo had decided that it was time she tried to take the next step in their relationship.

It was to be Ranma's last night with his foster family. They had been extremely kind to him and he needed to repay that kindness. A few months prior, he had managed to contact a company in Hong Kong. It was the evolution of the investors which had managed his business so long ago. After proving his credentials, he was stunned to discover the wealth which had accumulated over time. Smart management had made him rich, and he had not even tried.

Now he transferred a hefty sum to bank account in his foster parent's name, and wrote them a long letter of goodbye. He explained that Ai loved them dearly, but she had found her real family. The explanation in the letter was designed to discourage them, and the sum of money, apparently donated by Ai's parents, was designed to be some compensation. Leaving the letter and bank book in the kitchen after school, Ai took her pack, prized possessions, walking stick and left. She would miss her friends, but she would never forget them.

That evening Ukyo and her father arrived at Ai's foster parents. Since they caught the couple as they were arriving home, no-one knew of Ai or Ranma's departure. Ai's parents had met Ranma a number of times, but the explanation they had was the same as Ukyo: she was Ai's brother, and lived separately since he could not support his sister. When Ukyo told them of her long friendship with Ranma, they whole-heartedly gave their blessing for her to be his fiancée. After all, if they were Ai's 'parents' surely they were his too.

It was not a formal betrothal, but Ukyo was now officially Ranma's fiancée, at least until she was eighteen, and the decision could be reversed. Ranma seemed like an intelligent young man, so he would come to realise the value of parents helping their children organise their life like this.

Neither Ai nor Ranma came home that night. It was not until the next morning that they found Ai and Ranma's letter. Ukyo cried for days at the loss of her friend and fiancée, and vowed that she would find them some day.

As for Ranma, he was sitting in a train, idly watching Tokyo roll past. He had not liked leaving friends and family, but it was time to move. If he stayed too long, people would begin to form strong attachments like Brush or Cologne did. He did not want to hurt anyone like that again. Best to make them sad now, than distraught later.

Sitting in the train carriage, all alone bar her staff and pack, looking to all the world like a young girl out for a day trip with friends, Ai was surprised when he heard a woman's voice. She had not seen the woman enter the carriage, and she had not been here prior to the last stop. When a light flashed past the train, it shined straight through the woman: she was just a spirit.

"Tendo Ranma, I need your help, and I can offer my help to you."

Ranma was surprised. Not so much at the appearance of a spirit in a train carriage; she had seen spirits many times before, and even had one as a pet. What surprised her was the fact that the spirit knew her correct name. Most spirits were neither smart nor particularly well informed about happenings on the physical plane.

"Greetings, spirit. What is it that you wish?"

"Ranma, I have a great story of woe to tell. Will you listen to what I say?"

Ranma nodded. Just a glance and a careful probe with his Ki had told him what he expected. The tall, dark haired woman was purely a

projection. All she could do was talk, and even speaking and being visible pushed the bounds of her spiritual presence. The only threat she posed was if she surprised him and went 'boo'.

"For many years I have worked for a wise and benevolent leader. He dedicated his life to spreading his peace and wisdom to all people that he could. Wherever he went, people obeyed his teachings and acknowledged his greatness. However, a great tragedy had befallen us."

The woman moved over and sat on the seat next to him. She gestured to herself and passed an arm through his chair. "As you can see, I have been reduced to this spiritual form. It is my duty to prepare for his arrival, and to help bring him here. Now, this is what I am reduced to."

Ranma nodded and mumbled his consolation. Spirits on the whole tended to complain a lot he found. It was usually better to let them get it out of their system, and they would go away of their own free will.

"Ranma, I know much about you, and I can see the power of the curse that holds you. Even though I am in this weakened form, my powers are great. To be able to bring my master here, I will need a physical body so that I might perform the tasks which are needed. I have come to you to offer an exchange. It is within my power to separate your cursed body from your own, and to take that body as mine. If you accept, I will join with you, and work from inside. Over time, I will be able to break the magic which holds these bodies together. You will be free of your curse, and I will be free of mine."

Ranma sat in shock. It had been his dream for so long now, and some spirit was actually offering it to him. Ranma leaned back in the chair and tried to evaluate her. It was a strange tableaux which held for several minutes. A mature, beautiful spirit sitting there calmly while a serious looking twelve year old reviewed her.

Eventually Ranma asked for more details and the spirit complied. Despite his hope (and fear) the process would not be a quick one, and would take several years to complete. Magic as powerful as this would not be easy, and could not be done alone. The spirit had another ally in Tokyo, and he would be her foster father while they both worked to free Ranma from his curse. At any time she desired, Ranma would be free to leave, and keep his curse forever if she desired.

They talked for quite a while till eventually Ranma accepted. Before the spirit joined him in his body, to begin weaving her subtle magic, he had one last question. What should he call her?

"My name is Mistress 9, and you shall be known as Tomoe Hotaru."

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> End Of Chapter <p>

## 7. Sailor Senshi Kick Youma Butt!

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current author.

This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the letters S, L and R.

Visit my website at  
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> \   
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_ /

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

Through almost four hundred years of history, Ranma has endured. He has been a husband to Akane and a second mother to children in the Joketsuzoku. From monk to revolutionary, Ranma has travelled much of Asia and Europe. At long last he has returned to Japan. At the end of last chapter, Ranma encounter a spirit woman called Mistress 9 who said that she could break his curse.

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> Sailor Senshi Kick Youma Butt!<br>  
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Tsukino Usagi lay on her bed and buried her face in her pillow. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought about the horrible things one of her best friends had said to her today. It wasn't fair! How could Ami-chan say such things? She knew that they would make her cry!

Rolling onto her back, Usagi looked up at the ceiling and moaned. All she wanted was what any girl would want: grow up, eat lots of ice-cream, marry the best looking boy in the world - Oh, Mamo-chan! - become a princess, rule from the most beautiful city in the world and raise a cute, little, pink haired daughter. What was wrong with wanting just that?

It was not really all that much to ask for... was it? Besides, they had all fought so hard for it. They had defeated Queen Beryl, freed Ail and Ann from the Doom Tree, and protected the future from the Black Moon Family, what else could you ask? Even when she had met



herself in the future, she seemed to be happy!

Usagi heard a scratching on her door and opened it, picking up the cute, black cat. "Oh, Luna! Ami said the most horrible thing today!"

So saying, she tightly squeezed the poor cat as she cried her eyes out, tears spraying everywhere. In some ways, Luna was glad she was behind held so tightly, otherwise she would have been soaked in the teary downpour. She had seen a crying Usagi come running into the house, trip over her, then run into her bedroom. While this was not entirely unusual behaviour, things seemed worse than usual today. Even given how emotional she was normally.

Eventually Usagi calmed down and stopped crying, and dived back onto the bed again. Just when she was thinking about having a nice, soothing nap, she felt something twitch and move under her breasts. Leaping off the bed, she brought one hand to her locket and screamed "Pervert!"

Moments before transforming into Sailor Moon and pounding the sneak who had been lying under her, she realised it was actually a rather squashed looking Luna. Picking up the cat, she patted its head as it recovered from her over-enthusiastic hug and her dive onto the bed.

Once she was revived, Luna worked at dragging the full story from her young charge. If there was some sort of rift opening between the Sailor Senshi, then it would be her job to mend it. The Senshi were a team, and needed to fight and work as one. After almost an hour of listening to the girl complain, Luna put her foot down and demanded some hard facts: just what did Ami say that was so bad?

"She said that demonic attacks were on the rise, and we might have another big fight on our hands again! I don't wanna have to fight all the time! Why did she say those horrible things? WAH!"

\* \* \*

At Ami's house, the rest of the Senshi were admiring how well their dauntless leader had taken the news. The girl was an enigma, within a conundrum, within a mystery, within a dizzy blonde. After meeting demons, aliens, refugees from the future, and sources of ancient evil all angling to conquer the world, you would think Usagi would be able to handle a little bit of bad news.

Rei had just finished giving another mocking review of Usagi's leadership when Minako spoke up in her defence. "Come on, Rei-chan. You know she's still a bit tense. Remember what happened the last few times we started seeing demons? Not only did we have to fight, but she watched us all get killed, AND she managed to loose Mamoru-san twice. I think she's handling it pretty well given all that."

Grumbling the brunette sat on the end of a couch. "I suppose so. But Meatball Head better pull herself together by this week's meeting. I'm sick of hearing her whine."

None of the others spoke up at that. Sure, they wanted to defend their leader, but she was just a touch on the emotional side. They

might love her and be willing to lay down their lives for her, but that did not necessarily mean that they enjoyed being in her presence when she was crying about some little thing.

After a while Makoto retreated to the kitchen to prepare some food for them; Ami's mother was at the hospital, working late. While she was in the kitchen, and Rei and Minako were discussing the boys at school, Ami stared blankly at her homework. 'Am I the only one who noticed?' She wondered. 'Usagi knows how much she would get picked on if she was here... is that why she ran off? Is she really smarter than we give her credit for?'

After finishing dinner, Ami activated her computer and brought up a display of demon sightings. There was a definite increase recently, and the Senshi tried to work out some sort of pattern. After an hour's study, nothing had become clearer. Then, while everyone was sitting back, tossing ideas around, the computer's alarm began to warble.

The computer had been set to monitor news and radio for any sort of alarming activity, and it had succeeded. Even as they watched, the computer began to display messages being sent to the police and other emergency services. An eight foot tall creature had risen out of a sewer, and was systematically destroying a set of shops.

Even as the girls transformed and ran from the room, Rei was trying to contact Usagi. Blast that girl! She was supposed to be their leader, and that meant she was supposed to be available to lead them. Mars was willing to admit that she had shone through when the chips were down, but it was all those other times which she fell down (literally!) which upset her. This was another perfect example. They had busted their buns running across the city to defeat this evil before it could seriously hurt anyone, and where was Sailor Moon?

It was a small set of shops in a residential section of town. Houses nearby, and small shops with cheap signs and insufficient parking. For a monster the size of this one, it should have been no problem to destroy the entire block in another half an hour. Only one thing stood between it and victory: a group of four cute little girls in short skirts.

The Senshi formed up in a loose phalanx, with Venus and Mars taking the lead. They were all old hands at this job, and knew the drill. Venus was inhaling a big breath to call the challenge when a bright arc of light swooped down and crossed the path in front of the demon. Every eye within range turned to look at the proud girl standing on the roof opposite the demon.

Standing tall, the breeze blew her long hair behind her in two long, graceful arcs. Hands on hips, the warrior maiden posed melodramatically waiting for everyone's attention to focus on her. From the red gems in her hair to the tips of her red boots, the girl radiated the presence and power of a saviour, and the bearing of a future Queen.

"I am the pretty soldier, Sailor Moon! Shops are there for all to share, in the name of the Moon I shall punish you!"

In a flash of glory, and with a cheer from the crowd, Sailor Moon sailed from the building, preparing to defend the rights of love and

life for all people in her city. The demon faced her and charged. Voicing their battle cry, the other girls entered the fray.

The battle was joined.

\* \* \*

Life was hard, probably the hardest it had been for over a hundred years. If you've ever tried to conceal something from a group of inquisitive ten, eleven or twelve year olds, you'll realise just how hard it can be.

Ranma had Mistress 9's promise that someday he would be freed from his Jusenkyo curse, and he believed her. No-one had ever offered him that level of assurance before, and she had shown him just how much effort she was willing to put in. Every day he could feel the subtle touch of her spirit working on the magic which bound him. When things were at their hardest, when he felt the pressures were too great, he would concentrate; feeling the subtle workings on his body.

Mistress 9 was a spirit, and nothing more than that: a projection of herself from elsewhere. Even with the infusions which her 'father' was producing, the process of curing Ranma of his alter ego - Tomoe Hotaru - was a slow and difficult one. Hence the illusion which he wove.

Someone as powerful as Tendo Ranma would stand out like a search light to those evil people who would try and prevent Mistress 9's work. Meek, mild and feeble Tomoe Hotaru, on the other hand, would stand out like a piece of coal at midnight. The real Hotaru had died in a lab explosion shortly before Ranma arrived, and before her death she had tended to be a weak and sickly girl. Almost any exertion would make her collapse, and if you tried to have her run even a short race...

That was where Ranma had put his (or her) foot down. Mistress 9 had said it would take years of work. There was no way she would give up all exercise for that period of time. Now, little Hotaru had taken up exercising at midnight. A short hour's sprint to the west was a nice little park, just right for some Martial Arts practice. Three hours there, then back, and it was enough time for a short nap before school.

Things had been going well for Hotaru at school, from the scholastic point of view, and even better for staying anonymous. Two weeks after Hotaru had started at the new school, one of her ten year old class mates had tripped and scraped her knee. All of her determination to remain inconspicuous could not survive in the face of the screaming and crying of the little boy. Before she could stop herself, Hotaru was there, applying her 'healing hands'. When the crowd gathered in, she feigned exhaustion after her effort. It did not help greatly.

The other children were amazed and then scared. Anything strange or different was bad. The nail that sticks up gets hammered down. A girl that could heal minor wounds just by touching was definitely a nail in need of hammering. Two years had passed since that first incident so long ago. Despite her efforts, the cries of injured children was too great to ignore, and Hotaru quickly became a pariah.

"Don't go near that Tomoe girl. She's \_strange\_"

\* \* \*

Kaiou Michiru gently pulled on the bow of her violin, drawing beautiful music from the wooden instrument. Something so simple and plain as wood could produce such beautiful music, and could be so lovely. Michiru sighed as she started the next phrase in the music. Notes flowed out, filling the large room with their beauty.

She enjoyed the violin, there was really nothing like the thrill which she got when she played in front of a large audience. Her audience today was just herself, and still the beauty of the music filled her. She drew strength from it, and used it to stabilise her thoughts. Her best friend was coming over for dinner tonight, and she was going to play this piece for her, so she wanted it to be perfect.

Michiru could never understand how she and Haruka had become such good friends, they seemed so different. Michiru was quite, artistic, a musician and a painter. Haruka was outgoing, lively, a racing driver. She breathed a small giggle as she ended the piece, some might even call her a tomboy, the rest though she actually was a boy.

Setting the violin down, she placed it carefully in its case and walked to the kitchen. Her family could have easily afforded the servants to cook dinner, but somehow, it seemed wrong. Besides, Haruka liked her cooking so much more than when they went out. Placing the ingredients around the kitchen in preparation, she thought about all her other friends at school, and what they were doing. 'What \_were\_ they doing?' She wondered again. It seemed to have been such a long time since she had talked to anyone else aside from Haruka.

Tilting her head to one side, she tried to think about the last time she had been out with a group of people which did not include her best friend, and realised she could not. Sliding some food into the oven, she also realised it did not matter.

Just as she was lighting the candles on the table, she heard the revving of a powerful engine: the sure sign of Tenou Haruka arriving. In no time, Haruka was in the house, filling it with her life and vitality. Smiling at her friend, she chased the tall blonde upstairs for a bath. As the other girl washed off the sweat and oil from a night at the track, Michiru pulled the food from the oven, and served it up.

Her timing was down to a Tee: no sooner was the food on the table than she felt herself held in a tight hug. "Long time no see!"

Getting an affectionate but platonic kiss on the cheek, Michiru ushered the girl to a seat. "Long time indeed! I seem to remember watching a certain blonde riding off after final period today."

Taking a big, appreciative sniff of the food, Haruka looked at the other person who meant more to her than she wanted to think about. "Let's just say it seemed like a long time."

They completed their meal in friendly conversation, mainly talking about the racing circuit. Being with one of the premier racing car drivers of the country had given Michiru a firm appreciation of the sport. It was only after they had finished the meal and rested for a while that they went back to the music room.

This time, the music was different. It was the same piece, it was the same artist, it was the same instrument, but somehow there was more life. In the high parts, the piece soared with hope and love. In the low parts, the perfect notes brought a tear to the eye, and moved player and listener alike.

When she was finished, Michiru rested the violin in her lap. She lifted her eyes to see her friend staring at her. "Did... Did you like it?"

Haruka took her in her arms again. "Oh, that was the most beautiful thing I have ever heard! Tell me your going to be playing it at your big recital in a couple of weeks!"

When Michiru nodded, the other girl released her, but continued to hold one hand while they talked. The next few weeks promised to be very exciting for both of them.

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> End Of Chapter <p>

## 8. Half A Man And Getting Better

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This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the letters L and the numbers 2 and 3.

Visit my website at  
> dzillman@ozemail.com.au<br>  
<http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>

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> \

> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was

drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

Through almost four hundred years of history, Ranma has endured. He has been a husband to Akane and a second mother to children in the Joketsuzoku. From monk to revolutionary, Ranma has travelled much of Asia and Europe. At long last he has returned to Japan. Recently Ranma encountered a spirit woman called Mistress 9 who said that she could break his curse. Simultaneously, the Sailor Senshi are preparing to face a new enemy that threatens Tokyo.

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> Half A Man And Getting Better<br>  
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Ranma loved Tokyo, and he wondered how he survived for so long away from Japan. Simply everything about the city made him want to leap with joy, and he felt alive today like no other. All around him, he saw people walking, talking and laughing. Spontaneously he joined them, leaping to the roof of a nearby house to laugh and cry in joy.

All around him the city stretched in its sprawling beauty. Even though the morning was still cool, and the dew sparkled off the roofs and trees, he could not recall the last time he had seen a more beautiful day. Leaping down to the street, he bowed to some startled people, waving his stick in a flourish, then ran laughing on his way. Surely today could not get any better. Oh, Akane, if only you could see me now.

On a day like today it was so easy for anyone to see why the city was so lovely. The people were nice, polite and, well, they were his people. While cool, the day was remarkably pleasant, and the way the sun was creeping over the horizon - what a sunrise that was - it promised to be perfect and warm without being hot.

Standing in a park, Ranma spread his arms wide and closed his eyes. Opening his senses to the magic, he revelled in this other beauty. He had thought that there were potent places in Tibet, but they hardly compared to Tokyo. A focal point for the Ley Lines in the area, Tokyo was awash with energy, giving even the weakest magician the power to impress. And the colours! Blues, reds, greens, all moving and swirling together. Those poor people who could not see it! He laughed again, with all this power, it was no wonder Tokyo seemed to get attacked by giant monsters and demons more often than anywhere else in the world.

Oh, sure, Ranma knew about the demons. Who could live in Tokyo and not know about it? Good thing there was at least one effective vigilante group, otherwise he might feel inspired to do something. As it was, he had his spiritual, magical and physical senses wide open, drawing in the peace and glory of a perfect day, and blasting out waves of health and happiness all around him. Anyone coming within a ten meter radius of him were struck by a sudden feeling of relaxation and complete well being.

Even as he ran along the streets he came across a small trebling in the spiritual dimensional barriers. Today was not a day for fighting: it was a day for champagne wishes and caviar dreams, a day where they

all came true. Ignoring the stares of the people watching, he moved over what would soon be an entrance from one of the nether worlds, and began to dance. Mapping out a warding, he sealed it in place with lines of fire, drawn magically from the buoyant, exuberant feelings he had.

Even as he moved on down the street, the glowing symbols faded, powerful motifs etching themselves into the ground. That was his good deed for today, and one demon that the Girl Guides would never need to deal with.

Grabbing a lamp post, he swung himself around and almost burst into the chorus of 'Singing In The Rain', hampered only by the fact that there was no rain to be singing in. Hmm, too dark down on the streets, time to hit the roofs again. Laughing in a subtly disturbing manner, he ran and jumped, propelling himself at speed, not caring about the looks, or the comments he attracted.

This morning, Mistress 9 had awakened him just before sunrise. Her long work was paying off, and she had finally broken one of the most powerful parts of the spell. No longer was he cursed to change at anything less than boiling water: warm water was sufficient! Oh, Akane, if only this could have happened 400 years sooner!

At the same time that Ranma was running around and exhorting just how lovely the day was, others were bemoaning the fact that it was another school day. Children all over the city were rising and getting ready for another day of dull lectures. Had he considered the problem, Ranma probably would not have cared what his friends at school thought of Hotaru's absence today. Fortunately, Hotaru did not have any friends, so no-one really noticed her absence.

The girls of Juuban High saw it as another day of the same old routine. Strange things were afoot, but traditionally they waited until after the girls had rushed through their morning routines and arrived at school. The school may have felt some sort of lenience if a demon had attacked it's students and that caused them to be late, but since Usagi and Minako were late so often, they got to stand in the hall of a while.

Most of the other Sailor Senshi (in their normal guise) were at school, attending some form of learning institute. Only one was not today, and that was Sailor Pluto. She knew they were out there, and she knew that it was almost time to contact them. The Outer Senshi would be needed soon, and she would be there to bring them into the fold and guide them to their future. But now was not the time, and since time was her speciality, she waited and prepared.

At the Mugen Gakuen Academy a pair of close friends spent the day in peaceful bliss, ignoring any vicious rumours which may have been circulating. What does it matter what other people say when you only care about the opinion of one other person?

Rei's day had been as good as one could expect for a school day. No monsters, no demons, no Usagi wailing at nothing in particular... actually today was quite good. The quality of the day really rested on the perspective that you looked at it from.

Walking down the street outside the school, she nodded to passing friends and acquaintances. To these people, the day had probably been

fairly dull, maybe even a bit of a trial, depending on the amount of study that they had done. From that perspective, today was wholly unremarkable.

Saying a quick 'Hello, Sensei' she passed one of teachers who was picking on several of the rowdier students. Rei flicked her long black hair over her shoulder as the wind brushed it and ignored the stares from the boys. They were so immature. To them, today would be measured by which girls they managed to grope, or which boys they intimidated. Feh! How trivial!

Turning down a street, she headed to some stores on the way home, her shoes clicking on the concrete paths. Her religion taught the value of all things, and their place in the world. Her friends in the Senshi also taught her the same things. They might be aggressive or flighty, smart or klutzy, but they all realised the significance of what they fought for. To them, the lives of these simple shop keepers was something worth risking their own lives for.

As she took some fruit from the vendor and handed over the coins to him, Rei wondered what his opinion of today was. Did his world revolve around profit and loss? Or did he have a family? Wife and children more valuable than the whole world? Could he even understand what she was thinking? Would he understand the point of view of a girl reincarnated from the defenders of a kingdom which was now rising from thousands of years of slumber?

Probably not.

Arriving at the Hikawa Shrine which was her home, she removed her shoes and walked inside. Stopping in the kitchen, she deposited the fruit she would be using for desert. She headed to her room and got changed, all the while wondering about her grandfather. She did have to admit his wisdom, but she wondered how much he thought about the serious issues in the world. Or was his view of important actually that different from hers? Perhaps she should ask him.

Rei was so wrapped in her thoughts that she hardly registered the sound of voices as she walked through the shrine buildings seeking her grandfather. All her life she had been training to take over the shrine, and he was her teacher. Not only her teacher, she realised, when she walked into a room containing her grandfather and a young man with his black hair held back in a short pony tail.

Both the men looked up at her intrusion, and she bowed her head in shame. How could she have been so rude? "My apologies, I shall be sweeping the yard, Grandfather."

Before she could back out of the room, her guardian called to her. "Rei-chan, a moment of your time. This young man has come to us seeking some training in Shinto. He says he is not acquainted with our methods, but he has studied some similar work in India. Would you be so kind as to work with him for a while?"

As soon as she bobbed her head, he was up and out of the room. Looking at the boy, she realised what her grandfather was up to again. Always match making! From the way the boy was staring at her, she figured that he must have seen her here before and came purely for a chance for a date. "I'm sorry, if you've come to ask me out for a date, I'm not interested."



The boy just sat there. It wasn't that she was not interested, he was quite cute in all honesty, she just did not like the idea of someone taking advantage of her religion as a dating service. After a minute he still sat there with an open mouth, gaping at her. Bending down in front of him, she waved a hand in front of his face.

Ranma had been stunned. While he was bouncing around the city he had seen the shrine and realised that he had no knowledge of the most popular religion of his native land, so he had dropped in for a chat. They had retired to a small, sunlit room, and Ranma had stacked his small pack and walking staff in one corner. After talking with the old priest for a while, this girl had walked in, and he had almost fallen over. In his mind, he added twenty years and removed about three foot of lustrous, beautiful, black hair.

"Akane---?"

"No, I'm Rei."

"Is... Is it you, Akane?"

She stood up and put her hands on her hips. She had heard of boys trying the 'Do I know you?' trick, but she did not believe anyone would really be dumb enough. "No, silly. Rei. One syllable: Rei. Akane, three syllables, Rei: one."

The boy shook his head and bowed. "My apologies, Rei-san. I mistook you for a very dear friend. She... She died a long time ago. The Indian mystics... they often told me of reincarnation. I'm afraid I was mistaken for a moment."

Rei returned his bow. He was not quite as bad as she thought, even if he did admit to trying to use a pick-up line on her... sort of.  
"That's OK..."

"Ranma. Tendo Ranma."

"That's OK, Tendo-san. I think I can say with pretty-high confidence that I am not the reincarnation of anyone you might know." Not unless you happen to be thousands of years old, she thought.

"Please, call me Ranma. Should I call you Sensei?"

Rei let out a chuckle. "No thanks, I don't think I'm quite ready for that title yet. Well, why don't we see what you know."

After giving a general overview of the philosophy, Rei went on to show Ranma some of the more applied aspects of Shinto, since that was what she had been planning on studying tonight. Fighting demons gave her a real interest in improving the speed and quality of her wards.

After demonstrating a half a dozen of the basic wardings, to ensure pleasant dreams or good cooking, Ranma paused her for a moment and pointed to the last one she had written. "That's a new one to me. It's got a simple sort of efficiency. I know someone who could have really benefited from a cooking charm... once..."

Seeing her guest start to drift off into memories, Rei gave him a

brief tap. "Pay attention! Do you mean you know the others?"

"Well, not precisely. I'm familiar with the first three, and I know the fertility charm in a few older forms. The dream ward... that one I only know in this form; can I borrow the brush?"

Passing him the brush and ink, Rei sat in amazement as Ranma rapidly began to sketch. In fast, flowing strokes he built a ward. At first she was lost, then she saw the form beginning to emerge. It started out as an alarm against possession, then built up, including charms for fortune, happiness, and dreaming, ending with a seal against demonic tampering or intrusion.

Rei sat back stunned. She could have constructed it, but it would have taken her five times as long at least. And she would have had to work it out from scratch. What was sitting on the floor was the dreaming equivalent of a reinforced steel door, compared to her fly screen. Catching her breath, she studied it a bit more.

Hah! He knows the form but it's not active! No wonder it was so easy. "Nice picture, but it won't do anything. Anyone can draw a pattern, but can you charge it?"

Taking the ward she drew in her hand she chanted and threw it at a wall where it stuck. "Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, sai, zen. Akuryou taisan!"

Ranma raised an eyebrow as the ward glowed with life and then settled back to its waiting form, appearing no more than a decorated piece of paper. Taking his own, larger, ward he simply passed it to Rei. "Most impressive Rei-san. You show a lot of talent. With that sort of power, you might even be able to banish a minor demon."

Rei snarled. Make fun of her, would he? Taking his ward she slapped him over the head with it. When it glowed into life and he had to pull it off, she almost fell over. "But... It wasn't... but it is... how... when?"

Ranma laughed. "It's a matter of practice. It won't work on me since I wrote it, so there's no need to worry about that."

"Gee, you're pretty good. I'd hate to be beaten by a girl, at least I'm still the best at that."

Ranma smirked. Don't worry, Rei-san. Mistress 9 tells me it should only be a few more months, and you really won't have to worry. Just a little longer and I'll be a whole man.

They stayed and talked for much of the evening. Around seven, as storm clouds gathered, Ranma made a hasty goodbye. Donning his pack and taking his staff in one hand, Ranma stepped into the main courtyard and bowed deeply to Rei. "Thank you so much for your time this evening, Rei-san. I'd really like to come back again, and we can teach each other some more."

"Bah! You just got lucky. One ward and you think you know everything. Idiot! See if you can do that again next time."

Ranma danced backwards out of her reach. He hadn't had this much fun arguing with anyone since he met that trader in 1641. "Ha! You are so

uncute!"

Rei snarled and was about to yell at him when he clapped both hands over his mouth, a look of absolute terror coming over his face. Before she could do anything he was outside, and she was ducking under cover to avoid the rains which chose that very moment to start falling.

Rei was barely under cover when her grandfather was pushing her back into the downpour. "No, no, no. Can't let a handsome young man walk home in the rain, can we? Quick, quick, go get him, you two can spend the night.... studying! Yes, you need a study partner."

Mumbling under her breath and glaring daggers at the old man, she complied, but there was no sign of Ranma. Far down the street - in either direction - all she could see was the one small girl walking miserably in the rain, carrying an oddly familiar staff, and wearing clothes that somehow looked too large.

The one small girl was also Ranma, and she could not believe what she had said. 'I'm sorry, Akane! I didn't mean it! It just slipped out! She's really pretty, honestly! You're the only uncute tomboy for me! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!'

Neither the rains nor the heavens cared, and Tomoe Hotaru walked home: sniffing, crying and dripping the whole way.

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> End Of Chapter <p>

## 9. Have You Been To Jusenkyo?

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This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the letter A and the number 1.

Visit my website at  
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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only

be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

Through almost four hundred years of history, Ranma has endured. He has been a husband to Akane and a second mother to children in the Joketsuzoku. From monk to revolutionary, Ranma has travelled much of Asia and Europe. At long last he has returned to Japan. While Ranma's curse is being cured by the spirit woman called Mistress 9, he attempts to fit into modern society, learning Shinto from a certain temple maiden.

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> Have You Been To Jusenkyo?<br> -----

When lunch came around and her friends woke her up, Usagi started an earnest conversation on her favourite topic: boys. Favourite that is, other than food, ice-cream or food. Best yet was a conversation about eating out with cute boys while you were eating ice-cream. Hey! School was over for today, they weren't going to the concert for a few hours...

"Guys, lets go the arcade! We could grab some ice-cream and watch the boys walk by!"

Makoto bent down and wave a finger at the short leader. "Now, now. What about poor Mamoru-san? Is he cast aside so easily? Alas, it is only the poor single girls here that should be looking at all those trim, firm bodies."

Usagi stuck her tongue "Blargh! Hey, just because I've got the best, doesn't mean I can't check out the rest. Ami-chan! Tell them we have to go so we can get the tickets early."

Ami 'blink-blinked', confused at the abrupt change in tactics. "Well, yes, but..."

Usagi grabbed Ami and Minako by the hand and started running down the street, leaving Makoto to catch up - an easy task given her long legs and athletic skills. "All right! We got games, we've got guys and we've got ice-cream. What more do we need?"

"The tickets?"

Usagi tossed her head, sending long hair flying. Sorry Minako, I'll watch that next time. "Ease up, Ami-chan. We'll get them, don't worry. When am I ever late for something important like this?"

Before the brunette could answer, Usagi shifted her short attention span back to the other blonde. Sorry Ami, got you with the hair this time, gotta learn to watch it. "Come on, Mina-chan, I challenge you to a game of Sailor V, let's see who's the best!"

All the girls laughed at that one. Who would dare to beat the pretty soldier, Sailor V herself, in a game named after her?

The afternoon passed in excited bliss. The played games, ate sweet food, laughed and talked. As the sun began to move to the horizon,

Ami finally made herself heard, and they went to the ticket office for their passes to tonight's concert. Everyone was looking forward to it, it was starring one of Japan's greatest young talents at the moment, a brilliant violinist called Kaiou Michiru.

Anyone who had seen Kaiou-san play all agreed that she was a sight and sound to behold. All of boys who spoke about her said that she looked like a green haired goddess descended to earth, an Avatar with the ability to move people with her music. Even the other girls had agreed that she was worth seeing, not only for the brilliance of her music, but the really cute boyfriend which seemed to attend all her concerts.

They were almost at the ticket office when Makoto took Usagi's arm and pointed ahead of her. There was someone getting tickets already, and boy, was he cute! Although they could only see him side on, he looked a few years older than the four girls, and they must have been years well spent. He was trim, taut and terrific. Even his most casual movements oozed with strength and power. Little flowers and blossoms appeared around him as the girls looked, and in their minds, he turned and smiled at them, soft romantic music playing in the background.

Then he did turn, and looked right at them. Makoto took Usagi's arm for support, going weak at the knees when those perfect blue eyes brushed across her, and then stopped. Although he was at least ten or twenty meters away, he seemed to hesitate for a moment, then he shook his head, turned and walked off, moving away from them.

The girls released a collective sigh as they came back to their senses. "Wow, now that's what I call a \_guy\_! Hey, Mako-chan, he seemed pretty taken in by you, is that the old boyfriend you keep telling us about?"

Shaking her head Makoto sighed again and looked at Minako. "I wish. Can't you just imagine those nice strong arms around you?"

Everyone sighed again and drifted off into their private dream world, where a handsome stranger came and swept them off their feet for a romantic evening, just for two. Minako was the first to come back to earth, and looked at her friends. Grabbing hold of one of Usagi's long ponytails, she gave a brief tug. "Give it up, Usagi. You've already got Mamoru-san and Tuxedo Kamen. Leave one of the nice guys for the rest of us!"

"Oh, Mamo-chan! How could I think of anyone but you? You're perfect, but he was just so... so... so CUTE. And those big blue eyes..."

The other girls pulled Usagi back to earth, and they finally managed to buy their tickets, leaving just enough time to sprint home and get ready. Meeting up at the concert hall, all the Sailor Senshi were in attendance, dressed up in smart looking clothes, watching the performance. The other girls for once were glad that Usagi was holding onto Mamoru so tightly. If he was there, there was no chance she would stray after this new boy which they all had their eyes on.

Before the lights went down, the girls spent the time looking around at the well dressed people, pointing out anyone that they recognised. There were celebrities and notables, and the occasional good looking

guy. No-one could wear a tuxedo as well as Mamoru; but he did have a lot of practice. Ami eventually spotted the good looking boyfriend of the violinist. He was sitting in the front row, almost close enough to touch his girl. Minako went misty eyed just thinking about how romantic the couple was. Imagine being able to come to a performance for this many people, and know that you were the one person they were playing for.

Moments before the lights went down, Ami spotted the short ponytail and strong shoulders of the boy from before. He was sitting just a few rows back from the front, and wouldn't see them, no matter how much they watched him. Pointing him out to her friends, Ami tried to show Rei the hunk they had spotted, but the lights dropped before she could.

The hunk in question was sitting admiring the concert. It was such a pleasure to be able to go places and do things as a man. Now that he could carry a thermos of warm water, he could be a man almost any time he wanted. In the darkness Ranma looked around and watched all the people in the concert while the music washed over him.

He had almost turned right around when he spotted a small blonde head further back in the seating. It took all his concentration to face the front again. It was that girl from the ticket office. I know I've seen her before... but where? Why do I feel this need to go and speak to her?

He focused on the concert and appreciated the music. Kaiou-san was extremely talented, and it was a pleasure to listen to her. Relaxing in his char, Ranma thought of other performances he had seen. As the music drifted to a slower selection, he felt himself moved with the music. In his mind he saw scenes of himself and Akane, and mourned for all the concerts he was never able to see with her. I hope you're out there somewhere, Akane, somewhere that you can see this, so that we really are together.

Looking down a couple of rows he could see the short blonde head almost in front of him. The fat woman beside him had identified the boy as the violinist's boyfriend. Ah, young love, he thought. I remember being that young. He just hoped that the two of them got on better than he and Akane did after they first met.

Eventually the concert ended and the lights came up. Ranma applauded with everyone else, for it had truly been a remarkable effort. He was also please to note that the only flower the violinist took was the one from her boyfriend. He would have headed for the exit then, but sounds of a disturbance reached his ears. Looking down, he saw that the blonde boy had been splashed by a container of water, wherever it came from.

The sight of the water made Ranma initially panic, then he stopped and looked closer at the boy. Tuxedo, yes, and a lean and handsome turn to his face which many girls liked... but there was something... It was only when the boy stood, brushed off the excess water and began to go backstage that Ranma figured it out.

The boyfriend was a girl!

In a single jump, Ranma was over the rows of seats, and next to the startled boy. Grinning widely, Ranma put out his hand to the

surprised girl. "Jusenkyo? Right?"

"No, Haruka."

She turned to leave, but Ranma kept up with her. "No, I mean: you've been to Jusenkyo, right?"

Haruka looked the stranger in the eye and glared. "I may have, but I'm afraid I don't remember you."

"No, you wouldn't. Listen, you've got to tell me, when did the Nyanniichuan return?"

Haruka was beginning to get flustered. Michiru was waiting, and she needed to talk to her. "I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about."

Ranma took her arm in a firm grip and pointed at her breasts. "Listen, you're a girl right? I saw what happened. It was Jusenkyo, wasn't it?"

Pulling her arm free, she spun around and began to move to the backstage entrance. She had been working all week to be able to say this to Michiru, and now this guy was trying to pick her up! "Get lost! I don't care where you think we've met. I'm not interested in dating you."

Ranma turned and made gagging noises. "That's disgusting! No way would I want to date another guy! Please! I know you're Michiru's boyfriend, I just need to know how this happened to you. You have to tell me, it's really important."

Rage seized her. She did not mind if strangers harassed her, but if they started going after Michiru, that was where she drew the line. Grabbing a couple of handfuls of his suit, Haruka pushed the unresisting stranger against the wall. "You stay away from Michiru, understand? If you ever try and hurt her, or even bother her, I'll kill you. Now get lost!"

Ranma stood stunned as the guy turned girl walked backstage. Gathering his wits, he charged after her. If she had fallen into the Nyanniichuan like he had, or even a version which did not make you young, he might have found a clue to a cure. He had barely taken three steps when he was stopped by a tall, mature woman, with a cold, serious expression, and dark green hair.

"Go away little boy. Stop bothering them."

Ranma drew himself up to his full height and looked her in the eye. "I am Tendo Ranma, Master of the Anything Goes School Of Martial Arts. I am not just a 'little boy'. That man knows something extremely important to me. I must talk with him."

"Don't even try. Those two are far too important to be bothered by you. Just turn around and walk away. I don't care what you are a master of, you are dealing with powers far in excess of your comprehension. Don't push me."

Ranma stared at her for a while. This woman's eyes held a deep serenity, as though she had seen it all. And he could detect a power

within her. An aura of restrained magic, of awesome might held in check. Now was not the time or the place to fight. Clenching his fists, Ranma turned to leave. As he departed the hall, he swore to himself. 'I will get the answers I need, and no witch will keep them from me.'

Inside the dressing room of Kaiou Michiru, the pronouncement of love that Haruka had been striving for was interrupted by the arrival of the same tall woman with the dark green hair, and the ancient eyes.

As Setsuna explained the reality of the Sailor Senshi, Michiru nodded, and Haruka felt a cold fear growing in her stomach. The Outer Senshi were the defenders of the Moon Kingdom, protectors from external threats, and champions of love and justice.

When the explanation was over, Michiru told the other two how she had always believed that she was there for a greater reason, and had been feeling the call to service within herself with increasing strength. Haruka was a different matter. It had been a bad night, she had been running late, she was splashed by water just after the concert, accosted by a stranger, and now she was told that the one person she realised she actually loved was not real, and nor was she.

According to Setsuna, it seemed that she and Michiru were both just the shells for their old personalities. She was really Sailor Uranus. She did not want to be Sailor Uranus, and more importantly, she did not want Michiru to be Sailor Neptune. It was not fair. Michiru was the one she loved. Michiru was the one who she would give her life for. She did not want to lose her, either to Sailor Neptune or to whoever would attack this long dead kingdom.

Before she knew what was happening, Haruka realised she was running down the street, tears falling from her eyes and being caught in the wind. It was not fair. They had both finally found the person that they needed, and now it was going to be taken away? Never! She would never give up her soul to become someone else, and she would never let Michiru be taken from her.

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> End Of Chapter <p>

## 10. Ryoga, The Eternally Lost... Pig?

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Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...



This story is dedicated to the letter B and the number 5.

> <p>

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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

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What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

Through almost four hundred years of history, Ranma has endured. He has been a husband to Akane and a second mother to children in the Joketsuzoku. From monk to revolutionary, Ranma has travelled much of Asia and Europe. At long last he has returned to Japan. While Ranma's curse is being cured by the spirit woman called Mistress 9, he attempts to fit into modern society, learning Shinto from a certain temple maiden. While Ranma faces his own problems, the ranks of the Senshi grow as the Outers are introduced to their powers and destiny.

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> Ryoga, The Eternally Lost... Pig?<br>

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Ranma had been back to see Rei twice in the last week since they had met. It was amazing really, he could not remember anyone he had gotten on so well with in a long time. It seemed that from the moment he stepped through her door to when he left at nightfall, they would be at each other's throats. At least half their conversations degenerated into shouting matches, and mindless name calling. Last time she had even started to throw things at him.

It was great fun.

Every time he saw her they would compete drawing wards, or showing off their mystical talents. Rei had an edge on him in some of the pure learning associated with Japan and the local regions, but he could always simply outdo her in terms of sheer spiritual power and the speed he could deliver it.

Today, before she had thrown him out of the shrine, they had held a competition. Each had a small candle, endowed with the power she used in fire readings. Then they set about extinguishing that power,

banishing it using wards or holy incantations, while at the same time the other was trying to block using the same means. It was an exciting way to practice, and great for developing speed and power.

While they played at it, and Rei knock up ward after ward, Ranma thought back to how he had played this against Mahidmaja in the late 1600s. The wrinkled old man had been a master, truly one of the greatest of the age. He hardly concentrated on Rei, thinking of the good times he had, learning at his master's feet. Ranma simply sat there, smiling calmly, occasionally bothering to make a few marks on the paper in front of him, delivering just enough power to deflect or oppose whatever attack Rei would launch.

Rei just kept getting more and more frustrated. 'What am I doing wrong? Is he reading my wards while I'm preparing them? All right, this time for real!'

In a blur of motion, she scrawled out a mighty channelling, enough power to seal a demon, and directed the ward at the candle. With something like this, she had freed people who had been possessed by youma, and no upstart boy was going to beat her. To her shock, Ranma held out one palm, and calmly deflected the spiritual energy into a bright flash.

What happened next defied her experience. Pointing at her candle, Ranma whispered the words "Moko Takabisha" and a tiny little ball of spiritual energy emerged from his hand. She could feel it's power as it sailed through the air and snuffed her candle.

"Wow, you're pretty good."

"Sorry about that, Rei-san. A lady called Deodorant taught me how to focus my Ki for Martial Arts a long time ago. If you can knock down a wall, it gives you a little edge in a competition like this."

'Such power! Even though he's lying about knocking down walls.' She had never realised it was even possible for someone to do that, and he had done it so casually. He was not just some student, he must be a fully fledged master! "Oh, so you come here and play with me? Try and make me look bad? You insensitive jerk! Take this!"

Throwing her now unlit candle, she bonked him on the head, and started chasing him around the shrine courtyard, yelling insults and trying to catch him. After a while, Ranma jumped straight over her, doing a pirouette on her head with one finger. Before she could turn he was past her, running outside, laughing at her.

"Come back here, you jerk!"

"Stand still and get what's coming to you."

When Rei reached the entrance to the shrine, Ranma turned and stuck his tongue out at her. 'Blargh!' He laughed all the way home. Rei-san was so much fun!

"Ohhh, I hate that boy!"

Ranma was almost home when a cry rent the air. "Tendo Ranma, prepare to die!!!"

Jumping back, he narrowly avoided being made into mincemeat by the crushing impact of an umbrella driven into the ground. Looking down into the three meter wide crater in the road, he saw a boy who looked around his own age. He had wild black hair tied back with a yellow and black bandanna. When he looked up at Ranma, he also looked really mad.

"Um, do I know you?"

"You dare to mock me? I shall destroy you!"

Swiping his umbrella through the air, the boy tried to smash his opponent again, but Ranma leaped back, putting some distance between the two of them. "Listen, pal, I'm sure we can work this out."

"Tendo Ranma, because of you I have experienced the worst hell has to offer! I shall destroy your happiness!"

Once again the bigger boy closed in for a fight. With lightning strikes, he whipped his umbrella around, attempting to flatten Ranma. Once he got close enough worry the martial artist, but Ranma dodged under the blow, and planted a foot in the boy's face. "Feh! I didn't even know I was happy."

The big boy began a dazzling array of strikes, each one lightning fast, and judging by the damage that they were doing to the ground and nearby walls, they were not short on power either. Finally he got close enough to worry Ranma, and Ranma struck back. In the blink of an eye, Ranma had struck the boy almost a dozen times, pounding on his torso and knocking him back through a concrete wall.

Shaking his hand in pain, Ranma admired his knuckles. 'What was that guy wearing? A steel plate under his shirt?'

Ranma had just started to move off when the pile of rubble stirred and the dust covered boy emerged. "Truly pitiful, Tendo. I'll crush you like a bug!"

Barely dodging under the deadly umbrella strike, Ranma back pedalled frantically. This guy was inhuman! Ranma had destroyed concrete buildings with weaker punches, and he got up, looking none the worse. Sighing, Ranma decided he had better take him down quickly. Hmm, nothing too dangerous, just something to persuade him to settle down so we can talk. "DIGGER BOLT!"

The magic blast left his palm, striking the boy in the chest, knocking him to the ground, where he slid along until he knocked over yet another wall. Ranma was wandering up to the resting place to dig him out when the debris flew everywhere. Standing there with a faint red glow surrounding him was the boy. Glaring at Ranma, he bared his fangs and brought his hands together: "FIRE BALLLL!"

"Wharg!" Ranma jumped aside, but only just, and the fireball smashed into the house behind him, setting it alight, and throwing bits of brick and glass over the street. By the time Ranma was back on his feet, his inhumanly strong opponent was readying another spell. "Ha! I see now I should have expected so little from a second rate sorcerer as you! If you can stuff up a simple summoning, how could

you get combat spells right? FIREBALL!"

Expecting this one made it easier to dodge. While Ranma was unharmed, the neighbourhood was definitely looking the worse for wear. Suddenly it all clicked into place. The single minded hatred, the fangs, the magic, the fangs, the inhuman strength and endurance, and especially those FANGS. "Ryoga? Hibiki Ryoga? Is that really you?"

Giving up on the fireballs for the moment, Ryoga closed in for another attempt to pummel Ranma into a fine paste. "Of course it's me! How many other demons have you tortured this way?"

"Hey \*\_dodge\_\* I only \*\_dodge\_\* summoned you the \*\_jump\_\* once! \*\_Hop, hop, roll\_\* I held that circle open for you for three days, but no, you were off raiding villages or something."

Ryoga had paused momentarily. "I was trying to find my back to the summoning circle! Four days of pure torture it was! If you only waited for me, I could have gone home then! Ranma, I shall destroy you!"

Ranma took off, leading Ryoga in a chase around the city. If Ryoga felt a need to break things, perhaps he would go easy if his target was out of reach. Maybe. Or maybe not. "Look, Ryoga, if you want to get home, I can create a portal for you in a minute, just stop attacking me."

Running along behind him, Ryoga had started slinging his headbands, breaking parts of roofs and chopping electrical poles and trees down. "I got home, some nice young Mamono Hunter was kind enough to send me back. It's what I found when I got there that made me so mad. Now stand still and die!"

Seeing Ryoga was preparing another fireball, Ranma charged in. Locked in close combat, the two slugged it out. In their fight they almost levelled an entire residential block before Ranma could disengage enough to try and talk again.

"What's so bad about being home? You belong in the hell of wild boars!"

"I know, but you didn't cast a summoning, you cast a binding. While you live, I share your curse!"

Ryoga threw a massive punch at him, cracking the pavement. Damn, I think I see those Girl Guides coming. "What?"

"That's right, I'm locked in this pitiful form until your death. No more can I be Ryoga, the mighty raging boar, terror of all who dwell in forests. Now I become, Ryoga, the insufferably cute little baby piggy. Blargh!"

"Water activated?"

"Yes, but..."

Moving faster than Ryoga could react, Ranma tackled him, throwing them both through a burst water main. Even as he felt Ryoga's massive arms preparing to crush the life out of him, the change occurred, and cute little Hotaru stood up with her pet pig in hand. Oh, oh, Girl

Guides approaching at ten o'clock. Deep in his heart, Ranma felt a sudden urge to speak with them, but to do so would mean the certain death of his friend.

Turning his back on the approaching girls, Hotaru sprinted down an alley and ran off into the city. Ryoga was biting her the whole way, but even he was smart enough not to call attention to himself while the Sailor Senshi were around. Some people liked to send you back to the darkest pits of whatever hell spawned you, but the Senshi had a nasty reputation for killing demons first and not bothering to ask questions later.

Sailor Mercury held up her computer and turned around in the ruins of the house. "This is definitely the right spot. I have readings of magical residues from those fireballs, and this is the last spot that demon was."

Even as Sailor Moon tripped over the one piece of loose brick in the entire street, Sailor Mars was looking like she wanted to throw some fire of her own. "Disappear? How could it just disappear? Demons magically appear, they don't just vanish. Where can it have gone?"

Everyone shrugged their shoulders. They picked over the remains of the house for a moment, looking for some indication of a dimensional portal or the Daimon eggs they had been seeing recently. Nothing. Venus eventually spoke up. "Well, if it's not here, it must be hiding somewhere. Lets split up and look for it. Don't look for too long, but we might be able to find it this way. Stay in contact."

With that the pretty soldier, Sailor Venus, ran off down a street, searching for a demon she was not destined to find.

Somewhere near the Tomoe family home, little Hotaru stopped and looked down at her cute little pet pig. Sitting down on the curb, she placed the pig between her feet and frowned.

"Ryoga, since you can't attack me now, I've got to say that it really is just a big mistake. I never wanted to hurt you, I was just practising the spell. Now, I really don't plan on staying cursed like this forever, and I sure don't plan to let you kill me, so you better get used to the curse for a bit longer. I'm sorry about all the problems I've caused you. I swear on my honour that I will not tell anyone about you being a demon, or about your curse, so just stay calm for a while. OK? The good news is that I'm getting closer to a cure than I ever was before. In a few months, we should both be free men! How's that sound?"

Judging by the way the psychotic black piglet was trying to gnaw off her leg, it still didn't sound too good. Pulling Ryoga off by his bandanna, she looking into his big piggy eyes. "Perhaps I should put that another way. Which would you prefer: you wait patiently till I'm cured, or I have bacon for breakfast?"

The frantic struggles ceased. "I knew you'd see it my way. Come on, follow me and we'll get some hot water at home."

It was only three blocks to her home, but by the time she reached it and looked for her travelling companion, there was no sign of the pig. Heading inside, she set about getting some dinner. Apparently

one of her father's assistants was actually the housekeeper, but these days Kaolinite seemed to be out doing odd jobs more than she was home.

Cooking up some stir-fry from the assortment of vegetables in the refrigerator, she headed down to her 'father's' lab. Knocking on the door she opened it with one foot and carried the food in.

Souichi was sitting at his workbench, a massive quantity of concoctions bubbling and boiling away in front of him. He was staring intently at one of the containers, watching a particularly nasty looking black mass bubble and boil, and failed to see her come in. She placed a meal beside him, and watched quietly for a moment as he consulted a thermometer and tapped the side of the beaker a few times.

The food seemed to catch his attention, and he reached down and placed her on his lap. Mistress 9 had warned Ranma that this sort of thing might occur occasionally. Souichi actually thought that Ranma really was his daughter Hotaru, who had died tragically. Something about a lab explosion... Lots of strange chemicals... bubbling and boiling... Ranma began to get a little nervous.

"Just a moment. Any second now... Done!"

With that, the elder Tomoe whisked the beaker off with a pair of heat tongs and poured its disgusting, thick black contents into a pair of smaller beakers. Taking one of them, he lifted it to his nose and inhaled deeply. Taking a sip he smiled and gestured for Hotaru to join him.

She looked at the beaker and wondered how she could get out of it. The smell of chemicals in the lab was overpowering, and she hesitated to think what sort of combination could have caused such a disgusting looking mess. After a few gentle nudges, she picked up the warm beaker and closed her eyes.

Bringing it to her face, she silently reminded herself of the horrors she had suffered in her life. The medicinal infusions which Tomoe had prepared for her to help Mistress 9's work were far from the worst, but this mess seemed to rival even Akane's capabilities. With one last gasp she put the glass to her lips and took as large a swallow as the temperature would allow.

As soon as it hit her taste buds, her eyes flew open and she stared at her 'father'. With a wink he touched the side of his nose. "Don't tell Kaolinite. If she knew I was using all this stuff to make the ultimate cup of coffee, she'd have a fit."

Relaxing onto his shoulder, Ranma reconsidered her opinion of the man. He might be a bit odd, he might see her as his dead daughter, and he might have vats of distilled evil stored under the floorboards, but anyone who can make coffee this good can't be all bad.

As Hotaru lay in her bed that night, the nightmares began again. Ever since the day she had seen those girls at the ticket office, they had been getting worse. Strange dreams, sometimes she could remember them, other times just the feelings of fear, danger and sadness.

He was walking through the halls of Akane's home. It was the third time he had come here, and he had yet to see another soul. As he looked around, he admired the paintings on the wall, and wondered what he could fetch for such items. In his dream, Ranma looked down and saw his black clad feet stepping lightly on cold stone floors.

'Stone floors? What stone floors?' As he looked up again, he could feel the anger in him, rising again. What gave them the right? What allowed them to live like this while he was forced to live on the road, and fight for everything that he ever desired?

For a time he held his anger in check, but as he walked through the halls of the castle, it just kept rising. 'Castle? Akane didn't live in a castle.' When he reached the main dining hall, it was all too much. There was a feast laid out, on a large oak table. Enough food to feed half a dozen, and just the one small woman eating. How could she?

He marched forward, yelling abuse at her, and she kept her head lowered, her short, dark hair falling forward and covering her face. Felling he was being ignored, he yelled again, hurling insults. Evoking no response, he struck the table, shattering the expensive hardwood, and sending the food to the floor.

"Do you know how I feel? Can you even imagine? To be hated by your mother? To be nothing more than a pawn to your father? To be looked at with fear and hatred? Do you know?"

Finally he had her attention. Slowly her head rose and he looked into her eyes. Bright purple eyes, so deep and perfect that you could fly forever in their depths. And as he looked into those eyes, he saw his own pain mirrored.

"Yes, I do."

It was all she said. So simple, so quiet. But she may of been the one person in the whole solar system who could have said such a thing and been believed. Looking into her face, he saw his own needs there, saw his own desires. Here was someone who finally understood. She spoke again.

"Do you want to be friends?"

Ranma awoke bathed in sweat. It wasn't a dream, it was a nightmare. Besides, Akane had brown eyes. Big, beautiful, perfect brown eyes. He didn't know any girls that had purple eyes. Shuddering she lay back on the bed and tried to get some sleep. Please, no more dreams tonight, just let me rest.

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> End Of Chapter <p>

## 11. If We Are Three, Who Is Four?

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This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the number 668 (the neighbour of the beast).

Visit my website at  
> dzillman@ozemail.com.au<br>  
<http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>

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> \ \_\_\_\_\_/  
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \ \_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

Through almost four hundred years of history, Ranma has endured. He has been a husband to Akane and a second mother to children in the Joketsuzoku. From monk to revolutionary, Ranma has travelled much of Asia and Europe. At long last he has returned to Japan. While Ranma's curse is being cured by the spirit woman called Mistress 9, he attempts to fit into modern society, learning Shinto from a certain temple maiden. Unfortunately, he now also has to contend with a roving pig-demon called Ryoga who he seems to have slighted some time in the past...

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> If We Are Three, Who Is Four? <br>  
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After avoiding her for days, Haruka had finally summoned up the courage to speak to Michiru again. She knew what she feared, and it was not the fighting which came with being a Sailor Senshi. What she really feared was losing the one person in the world that really mattered.

It had taken her a long time to come to the conclusion, but she had realised that the person that she truly cared for was Michiru, and she wanted nothing, her work, her destiny or some long dead kingdom to come between them.

It was then that she realised just what she would need to do to ensure that Michiru was safe. Everyone in Tokyo had seen the Sailor Senshi in action, and she knew of the superhuman feats which they performed. The only way that she could possibly help her friend in such a situation was to be with her, to be by her side in battle. To become one of the Sailor Senshi.



Even as she had shuddered at the idea, she realised that for one dream to live, another must die. For her to be with Michiru, and to be one of the Sailors, she must give up racing. The career which she had dedicated her life to was too public, and too dangerous to sit well with a long term relationship. Speeding around the track at hundreds of kilometres per hour was exhilarating, but the risks became too high when you considered that it was no longer just yourself that would be hurt in an accident.

With firm resolve she had tendered her resignation to head of her pit crew. 'Tendered her resignation', such a neat way of saying it, and it carried so little of the real effort or pain involved. When she first told him, he did not believe her, and why would he? Haruka had dedicated all of her young life to becoming the paramount racer of her age, she had defeated trials and hardship to be where she was, why would she throw it all away?

Trying to answer that question was one of the hardest things she had ever done. Here was a friend who had been there for her most of her life, and had given her so many of the opportunities she desired. Now she was casting them aside. Her first tries at explaining the situation had failed, being too obviously fabricated, or too shallow to account for her change in motivation.

She had been spared more difficult explanations by the sudden arrivals of a Daimon and Sailor Neptune. The battle had been short enough - and more exhilarating than cornering at 250kph with no brakes - and by the end of it, Sailor Uranus stood beside Sailor Neptune.

They had almost saved him too. The Daimon had extracted his heart crystal, and while they had been fighting, the evil witch Kaolinite had taken it. A person's heart crystal was almost a physical manifestation of the link between a person's soul, and their body. When they had the witch surrounded, she had crushed the heart crystal, dropping the shards and powder to the ground. In their panic to save the man, Kaolinite had escaped.

That had been two days ago, and now Haruka stood holding Michiru's hand as she looked at the fresh grave. Setsuna was behind them, and waited quietly until the two of them turned away and walked down the hill to Haruka's car.

"Have you been able to find out anything more about why the witch wanted the heart crystal?"

Setsuna shook her head and let her long dark green hair hide her face. People might think she was cold, possibly callous even, but she felt the suffering of those around her. She understood what it was like to see a friend die, she had seen too many die since the fall of the Moon Kingdom. Forcing iron into her voice, Setsuna answered in an even tone.

"No, not yet. There is more I can do, but I will need to be away for a while. Do you two think you can handle yourselves for a week or two?"

That might have been a head nodding, or it might have been swaying from inertia. There was no need to take the corner that fast, but

Setsuna expected Haruka just wanted to get home quickly. As she watched the street that Michiru lived on whiz past, she wondered if they were stopping there, or just going past. Yes, they were stopping, they were stopping very quickly. My, what good brakes this car has. I must remember to wear a seat belt next time.

Michiru was about to step out of the car when Haruka turned around and placed a hand on her arm, looking at the older woman in the back seat. Haruka had been quiet all day, and now it looked like she was ready to talk. "Setsuna. I've got a question for you. Every one knows the Sailor Senshi, right?"

"Yes, the Inner Senshi."

"And we're the Senshi for planets at the edge of the system."

"Yes, the Outer Senshi. The Inner Senshi are there to defend the Kingdom against attack from within, they are also the last line of defence for the Princess or Queen. We on the other hand are the Kingdom's defenders against external threat. If someone wants to hurt our Kingdom or the people we protect, they have to go through us first."

"Now my astronomy might be a little rusty, but I seem to remember the planet Saturn sitting somewhere between Jupiter and Uranus. Does it have a Senshi? And when will she awake? Is she an Inner or an Outer? I think we're going to need all the help we can get for this."

Setsuna bowed her head briefly. It was good to know the girls she would be working with could use their brains as well as their magic. "You're entirely correct. There was a Sailor Saturn. Maybe there will be again. "Sailor Saturn holds a special place in the history of the Sailor Senshi. She is the Senshi of creation and destruction, and she is arguably the most powerful Senshi in existence."

Michiru looked confused and furrowed her brow in a cute little frown. "I don't understand."

"Sailor Saturn is a special case. All of the other Senshi live and die in service to the Kingdom. They have normal lives and are normal people. Sailor Saturn is special. She only awakens when there is a great need for her. At a time when the Kingdom is in it's darkest hour, Sailor Saturn shall awaken. This tends to give the poor girl a most unfortunate reputation, being associated with all of that danger. "However, it can be a reputation that is deserved. Sailor Saturn is extremely powerful, possibly more powerful than Sailor Moon or Queen Serenity herself."

"But if she's so powerful, why would people be afraid of her? Can't she just toss whoever is attacking right back where they came from?"

"People are afraid for good reason. Tell me this, who is more powerful: Sailor Moon, who can bring someone back from the dead, or Sailor Saturn, who can destroy the world?"

Looking them in the eye, Setsuna continued without giving them a chance to answer. "Sailor Moon might have the power for it, but there is no way she could even think about trying to do something like

that. Sailor Saturn not only can do it, she would do it if that is what she thought was needed. Sailor Saturn is like a sleeping guard dog: she can defeat most intruders if she wakes up, but you have to pray that she never turns on her friends either through intent or ignorance. I suggest you do not wish Sailor Saturn is here to help us. Wishes like that have a nasty tendency to come true."

Somewhere, hidden deep inside, Setsuna chuckled. She knew Saturn would awaken, it was her destiny... it was all a matter of time.

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> End of Chapter <p>

## 12. Here's Looking At You, Kid

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This story is dedicated to the letter E and the number e.

Visit my website at  
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<http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>

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> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages.<p>

Through almost four hundred years of history, Ranma has endured. He has been a husband to Akane and a second mother to children in the Joketsuzoku. From monk to revolutionary, Ranma has travelled much of Asia and Europe. At long last he has returned to Japan. While Ranma's curse is being cured by the spirit woman called Mistress 9, he attempts to fit into modern society, learning Shinto from a certain temple maiden.

The last chapter was really short. Not much happened in it...

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> Here's Looking At You, Kid<br> -----

Little Hotaru walked along, struggling under the weight of a pack of school books, her only friend a wooden staff, and it didn't really contribute much to conversations. It was not really a struggle, it was more the weight of the words which surrounded her which were hardest to bear. Japan is a society which encourages uniformity. People should fit into society, not bend society to fit them. If you can fit, then it is the duty of your peers to help you fit. And no-one can be crueller than small children.

Ranma had always liked making friends, and was fairly adapt at talking to kids that looked like her age. When a new boy had turned up at school today, she wandered over to try and meet him at lunch. Perhaps if he had not seen her heal anyone, they could become friends before he ecided she was 'strange'.

She had barely taken three steps from the tree where she usually ate lunch - alone - when everyone noticed. In no time flat, everyone was talking to the new boy about her, pointing, laughing and telling lies. Before she had crossed the playground, the new boy was taunting her too.

Now that school was over, she could rally against the injustice of it all. All right, at four hundred she was just a little bit older than any of the kids, but they did not know that. Quite simply there was no-one in her age group to talk to, and even grown-ups seemed so young some times. The only person who came close to that was Ryoga, the demon. He was a baby by their standards, a mere three hundred or so, but demons specialised in anger and fighting, not conversation. Hotaru had found that out when she bumped into Ryoga yesterday. He was still mad at her, and they destroyed another city block before Ryoga got lost in the dust.

All she wanted was to be normal and accepted by everyone. There were lots of nice people in Japan, she had met so many herself. The problem was getting people to see past the facade which was presented, and to know the real person inside. She could tell that the only person she had met so far that seemed smart and caring enough, did not really care. It must have happened two or three times now: he would be having a conversation with Rei-san, and for no reason she would suddenly cut him off and the chase him away.

Dropping to the grass in a park, Ranma stared into the waters of a pond. In four hundred years he had made his share of enemies for things he had done, or things people thought he had done. In the past, it had always been a directed hate like Ryoga's. People hated him for a reason. He had even been in enough cities to know the indifference which crowding bred.

It was this general animosity that he hated. No-one liked him, and it was beginning to get to him. Takuhi was nice, be he was just a pet. Her face twitched slightly as she held back tears. She missed Ucchan and Kikyo. She missed Cologne and Brush. She missed Akane. She always missed Akane.

Ranma could not understand Rei-san. When he had first met Akane, she had been more than happy to tell Ranma when he did something wrong, usually with that awful mallet of hers. Sometimes Rei-san was like

that, sometimes she would yell and scream and show her temper. Other times, just the three, she would go all cold and distant. She would not tolerate him around, and ushered him out as quickly as possible.

Why?

Ranma was so engrossed in her thoughts she never even noticed when the hat blew past her. She just kept staring at nothing. When she heard a young girl's voice cry out, she finally looked around. Little girl: pink hair, sun-dress, quite cute, sixteen meters away, fallen, probably no broken bones, maybe minor scratches. Adults: tall, male, early twenties, forty-seven meters away, short, female, blonde... her again! Hat: matches sun-dress, blowing away in wind.

Hotaru sighed. What the hell, she'll end up hating me too, but she might be friends for a while. Getting to her feet, Hotaru took off after the escaping hat. After the first few steps she remembered that she was supposed to be weak and feeble, so she slowed down and started to breath heavily. After a few minutes of running she caught the hat and sat down on the grass, waving to the girl.

Eventually the little pink haired girl came up to her and smiled. Silently, Hotaru smiled and handed her the hat, keeping up the heavy breathing for effect.

"Thank you!" The little girl plopped down beside her. "My name's Chibi-Usa!"

Hotaru bowed her head. "I'm Tomoe Hotaru. It's nice to meet you."

"What are you doing out here by yourself?"

Hotaru looked down at the ground again. Well, this is going to be a short friendship. "I... I don't have any friends, so I was just..."

"Oh, that's so sad! Are you new here?"

"No, people don't like me because I'm different."

"I don't mind if your different. Almost everyone I know is really different. I'll be your friend."

As she spoke, she seemed to almost bounce with energy. The big rabbit ears she had her hair done up in seemed to almost wave when she moved her head, and Hotaru could almost believe her. She seemed to nice, so naive, so innocent, almost the way that you would expect a princess in a fairy-tale to act.

Pointing to the scratch on her knee that Chibi-Usa had received running for her hat, Hotaru drew her attention. "Yeah? How many people do you know that could do this?"

Hotaru concentrated and her small hands covered Chibi-Usa's knee for a short while. Even as they watched, the scratch healed, and the skin repaired as though it had never been damaged. Even as she healed the girl, Hotaru cursed herself for a fool. Here was someone willing to listen, and she was doing her best to scare her away. All right,

maybe not her best, but her best could involve levelling a large portion of the city. A touch excessive for indulging self pity.

She could not believe her ears when the little girl beside her cheered and clapped her hands. "That is so wonderful! I wish I could do that!"

Hotaru blushed. "No you don't. Too many people think your strange, and..."

Chibi-Usa interrupted. She knew it was rude, but it was better to stop Hotaru-chan from getting all sad again. Changing the topic, the two talked and talked. It was the start of a beautiful friendship.

They sat and talked for most of the afternoon, Mamoru and Usagi keeping their distance to allow their daughter to have a decent friend. While Chibi-Usa was their daughter, she had not been born yet. Sent back in time by her mother (Usagi) she was here to learn the proper way to be Sailor Moon, as she would some day inherit the powers and duties that went with the title. While they were (or will be) her parents, at this point they were also her friends.

When you are brought up as a princess, and you are also the inheritor of a position responsible for the safety of the entire human race, it's difficult to make friends. When you are repeatedly sent into the distant past, and separated from your family (sort of) it can be a hard time. Although she had friends at school, Chibi-Usa normally found it difficult to become really attached to anyone. Someday, all these people would be dead, and since she came from a time when they were, she had a hard time seeing other kids as life long friends.

Chibi-Usa looked at her new friend and sighed. Although she was really quiet, and did not like to talk about herself, Chibi-Usa could see she was a nice person at heart. Looking off to one side, she could see her parents approaching. 'Hmm, I suppose I can't expect her to tell me everything, I'm hiding a few little details..."

Seeing where the pink bunny ears were pointing, Hotaru noticed the couple approaching arm in arm. 'Damn, it's that girl again. Who is she? Why do I think I've seen her before?' When Chibi-Usa waved and she saw the couple's eyes light up, she nudged her friend. "Who are they? Is she really a Queen?"

Hotaru started. 'Is she really a Queen?' Where did that come from? She doesn't look like a queen. As a matter of fact, she looks more like a school girl.

Chibi-Usa was surprised as well. Looking at her hands, she wondered how she could answer something like that without lying. She had no idea if Hotaru was serious, but you can't just lie to people for no reason. "No... Not at the moment, she's not."

As the pink haired girl dashed off to be picked up and carried by Mamoru, Hotaru was trying to fight strange feelings in her head. Memories dashed across her mind: of fun times with Akane, of meeting royalty, and of a girl with short black hair, who showed her how to love and how to be a real man, and of a kind and caring Queen.

Each step that brought Usagi closer made the memories dash across faster. When she was finally two meters away, she stopped and looked at the now standing Hotaru. When she smiled and held out her hand, it was the last cue she needed. Suddenly all the flashbacks ceased and she called out the one thing that was at the top of her mind.

"The Queen is dead! Long live the Queen!"

Everyone stopped stunned as Hotaru dropped to one knee and bowed her head. "Your Majesty."

When they recovered from the shock, the trio looked down at the kneeling girl. Usagi turned to her daughter and creased her brow. All Small Lady could do was shrug her shoulders and smile cutely, as though saying: 'Don't look at me, Mum. She wasn't crazy until you got here.'

Getting no help from that front, she leaned down and touched the little girl on the back. "Are... Are you OK? You can get up now."

Hotaru stood and shook her head. What just happened? Why did she do that? She looked at Usagi and offered a shy smile while trying to check her out. 'Nothing special about her really, she seems to have a little magic, but that's it. She's no warrior or sorceress, and she definitely hasn't had any spiritual training... I don't get it. Two minutes ago I felt this incredible need to speak to her, and now it's gone. I just don't understand.'

When the girl started waving a hand in front of her face, Hotaru realised she was beginning to zone out. Smiling again she took the girl's hand, grabbed her staff and led them off, immediately changing the subject. Mamoru and Chibi-Usa looked at each other and shrugged. They had met a lot of strange people recently, and if the worst the girl did was claim Usagi was royalty, they had nothing to worry about.

Begging off joining them for dinner, Hotaru eventually went home after a bit more of a walk in the park. As much as she hated her 'father's' medicine, she was willing to get home every day to take it if it meant that she would one day be cured of her curse.

That night, she dreamed again.

The lightning flashed, and the thunder roared... and the people calling out his name. Or what was now his name. But he walked the halls in silence, for the only person who mattered was with him, and she walked by his side.

Taking his hand she calmed the rage and confusion that burned in him. 'How does she do that?' He wondered. Just the lightest touch of her hand and he knew all was right in the world. Outside the storm raged, and buffeted against the walls of the building. Inside, it was just as chaotic, people everywhere, watching them. Always watching.

His wife pushed open the great doors and walked inside. In those very instant that her hand left his, he felt the confusion return. The anger, the hatred, the pain and suffering. He was snarling at a guest when she took his hand and led him to the great table.

The mood swings were getting worse, and he knew it. One minute he could be calm and pleasant, the next he would be deadly. It almost seemed as if his soul needed the pain and anger, and when he was with his wife, all those moments of happiness would rebound when she left. Ignoring the guests in the room, he took his wife in his arms and whispered he loved her.

She held him too, and told him she loved him too. Around them, he could hear warriors muttering. "Not fitting." "Improper." "He's wrong for her." "Think where it will lead." Any other day he would have leaped at them, as futile as it may have been. He was a fighter, but there was no way he could beat their magic, his talents lay elsewhere.

Lifting his face from where it rested in the sweet black hair, he looked at the lady sitting at the table smiling at them. Most people would have called her beautiful, stunning, definitely regal. However, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and his eyes could behold the beauty of only one person. Everyone else were merely shadows, cardboard cut-outs on the stage of the world. Then again, she was the only one he knew of that approved of their marriage, so perhaps she was beautiful in her own way.

The lady spoke. "Everyone, could you leave us. I need to speak with him alone."

No-one liked that idea, but they complied. His wife tried to, but he held onto her hand like a drowning man. 'No, don't leave me. I can't stand being without you.' But gently, insistently, she loosened his grip. Giving him one of her gentle smiles, she kissed his cheek and slipped from the room.

By the time she left the room, tears were running down his face, the confusion, the anger and the pain were back. Looking at the woman standing there - golden hair and white robes, a gleaming crystal tipped sceptre - he knew she was his only hope.

"Please... Your Majesty."

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> End Of Chapter <p>

### 13. Cleaning Up The Opposition

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This story is dedicated to the letter A and the number 1.



Visit my website at  
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http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire

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> \\_\_\_\_\_  
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

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> Cleaning Up The Opposition<br> -----

When she awoke the next morning, the dreams were nothing more than fleeting memories of pain and confusion that quickly subsided. On the way to school, Hotaru thought on her dreaming problems and realised the solution. When you have a problem you can't deal with, fight! Her father taught her that too many years ago to remember, but it had served her well, and she was willing to stand by it as a philosophy that worked.

Some people say that fighting never solves anything, but Ranma believed that they had never fought before. Fighting can defeat enemies, and conquer nations. It can turn enemies into allies, make acquaintances trusted friends, and make friends lovers. Fighting brought out all the best in a person, the struggle, the challenge, and the commitment to the elusive goal of being the best. Fighting was also the best way to clear the mind and free the thinking.

She ignored most of her classes, other than history, which was always fun because she could think to herself, 'I was doing this when that happened'. After another rotten lunch and a boring afternoon, Hotaru dashed out of school and found a convenient hiding place. When she was sure no-one was around, she changed clothes, then doused herself with water from her thermos.

Walking down the streets of Tokyo, the Master of Anything Goes Martial Arts wondered how good the Martial Artists were around here. It took little more than twenty seconds in a phone book, and a ten minute jog, and he was at a Kempo club. Once Kempo had been the basis for Anything Goes. Since he was the Master, and probably the soul practitioner, he suspected that Amazonian techniques were more likely

the real basis now, but why not start with Kempo?

Entering the dojo he kicked off his shoes and bowed to the Sensei. Oh, goody, class was just starting. Asking permission to join in, the young teacher, probably in his late thirties, waved him onto the mat, and everyone bowed in.

The class was what you would expect for a public offering. The did a few light warm ups, some kicks and punches, and a little semi-contact sparring. After just a couple of hours of light warm-ups, Ranma was ready and eager to start training. Then the Sensei called them back. It was the end of training!

Immediately after the class, Ranma stalked up to the Sensei. "What was that, a beginners class? We didn't even do any sparring! And it was so short!"

The Sensei puffed out his chest. "Listen pal, two hours is plenty long enough for training. And what gives you the right to complain about my classes? I'm a third dan black belt in Kempo, with a second dan in Akido."

Ranma crossed his arms and puffed his chest out too. "I am Tendo Ranma, Master of the Tendo School of Anything Goes Martial Arts."

The Sensei lost his composure and started laughing. "Anything Goes? That's the most ridiculous name I've ever heard. Not only that, but you're trying to impress me by being the master in your own style. Feh! I'd like to see how you fair against a real Martial Artist some time."

Ranma went from scowl to smile in the course of the speech. Such an insult to the school could not be taken lightly. In any other circumstance, he would have challenged the man to a fight, but there was no need, the fool had just offered to take him on.

"Your challenge is accepted. Shall we fight now?"

The Sensei smirked and rotated his torso a few times to loosen it up, then did some spring kicks. "Sure. What rules do you want?"

"No magic, no Ki attacks, no killing, and no permanent maiming... that should just about do it."

Snort. "Yeah, right. No magic. Ha, ha. What about padding?"

Ranma looked down at the tatami mats on the floor. "No, leave it there. No sense in ripping it up just so we can fight on wood, unless you'd prefer to go outside?"

"Oh, ha, ha, a real comedian." With that they bowed and the fight began. Ranma decided to start slowly and work his way up. It would be the easiest way to gauge his opponents strength. He just hoped the guy was good enough to make it worth the effort. Other than Ryoga, it had been a while since a challenge had come his way.

Seeing his opponent was using a defensive stance, Ranma obliged and started the attack. A couple of punches and a kick, then roll away. Not bad, he managed to block them, a bit sloppy trying for that leg

brace, but he has potential.

Back in again, Ranma did a series of leg sweeps and feinted throws, seeking to drop the man on his backside. At the speed Ranma was moving, the Sensei evaded them, and returned to counter attack.

Watching the punch coming in, Ranma was reminded of the times he fought with Akane; trained that should be, since they really did fight when they were younger. Before they realised they loved each other. She was always a strong girl, but compared to him (or her as the he usually was) she was dreadfully slow. That was not saying a great deal, since it was not until he met Liniment that she met someone who really was faster than her.

For a while, Ranma reflected on that first time when he had fought Deodorant. He had believed at the time that being defeated by an old woman was a disgrace. It was only living the Amazon village for a time that made him realise how wrong he was. The Matriarch of the Amazons - which is the position Deodorant held - was not just there for her wisdom, she was also the recognised Mistress for fighting in the whole village; they were Amazons after all, and had a reputation to maintain.

Whoops, daydreaming too long there. Punch almost got me, better block it. And he's going for a trip too, ambitious fellow. Taking the arm which was still in front of his face, Ranma grabbed it both sides of the elbow. In less time than it took to blink, Ranma lifted the fighter by his arm, and lobbed him across the room. Just to teach him a lesson in finishing a strike quickly, Ranma allowed a little pressure on the elbow joint while he lifted for the throw. Not enough to break it or even permanently damage it, but it should hurt like hell for a few days.

The Sensei hit the wall fairly lightly and more or less flowed to the ground. After a few seconds he was staggering to his feet, reeling in confusion, and holding his elbow in obvious pain. Ranma stared in shock. But I only threw him four meters! Surely he can't be injured that badly. Hell, I was doing that to Akane until she was fifty and she would thump me with her mallet if I did it that lightly!

Keeping a defensive posture, Ranma watched as the man staggered back to the centre of the dojo. When the Sensei bowed to him, he realised it was over. Damn, I still haven't gotten past the warm up yet!

"My apologies to you and your school, Ranma-sensei. I have never seen someone so fast, or so strong before. I beg forgiveness for my rudeness."

Still in shock, Ranma bowed, mumbled something polite and left. What was wrong here? Most of the kids he used to teach the Intermediate course to back in the Amazon village would have beaten him. I've got to find a decent dojo!

Around that same time, the Sailor Senshi were gathered in an ice-cream parlour in their normal garb. Even as they ordered, Rei scratched her head and wondered why. Why was it always ice-cream they were getting? Was Usagi actually possessed by a demon with an ice-cream fetish? Was there some higher order in the universe which dictated the need to consume large quantities of ice-cream?

Rei watched a young girl in a booth. She was wearing bright red clothing and had a large hammer strapped to her back. To judge by the way she was hoeing into her ice-cream, you could almost believe that there was some declaration from heaven proclaiming the divinity of ice-cream. When Rei turned back to her friends, and saw Usagi salivating while she stared at the desserts arrayed before her, she dismissed that idea. Nothing could make Usagi look royal or holy.

"Come on, Meatball Head. The rest of us want to order before the shop shuts."

"Ohhh, but there's so many to choose from. I could get the Chocolate Ripple, or the Super Fudge, or the Strawberry Surprise, or the..."

She trailed off after a moment, frantically searching through her purse for enough money to be able to eat it all. The other girls sighed, then pushed past her and ordered their own. When Usagi saw her friends sitting down, halfway through their food, she finally took the plunge and ordered everything she could afford. She might be missing out on some really yummy stuff, but she knew they wouldn't wait forever.

Eventually everyone was seated around the table eating their desserts when Minako nudges Makoto. "Any more luck finding that hunk from the theatre yet?"

Makoto blushed and looked sheepish. "No, not yet."

"So is he really an old boyfriend of yours?"

"No, but I'm hoping to be able to say he's my current boyfriend some day soon."

Everyone sniggered, letting Ami speak up. "I only got a brief look at him. Is he really worth all the work that you're putting into it?"

"How can you say such a thing? Of course it's worth it. As I looked across at him, our eyes met, and I just knew he was the one for me. Somehow I just knew I was destined to meet him. We'll be the perfect couple, so beautiful and elegant! He's even cuter than Mamoru. Isn't he, Usagi?"

"I suppose it depends if you prefer the muscle bound, body like a Greek god look, or the refined face of a man who looks like a king."

"Feh! Knowing you, you'd want both of them, just so you won't miss out on anything next time one of them gets brainwashed or kidnapped or something."

Usagi blushed and hid behind her ice-cream for a moment. Realising the only way that she could stop them teasing her was to get someone new to tease, she popped up again and levelled her spoon at Rei (practising with the Moon Sceptre helped her immensely, even as a blob of ice-cream flew off the end she maintained her poise). "Come on, Rei-chan. What about this new boyfriend of yours?"

"Hey! He's not my boyfriend. He's just a new apprentice at the shrine."

"That's not what your grandfather tells us. From what he says your boyfriend is really cute. He says you two make a great couple."

Minako tossed in her two cents also: "Yeah, he even told me that the two of you should get married so you can take over the shrine."

"WHAT? How can he say that? That old pervert! No, we are not getting married."

Sensing victory, they closed in for the kill. "Ah, but she not denying that he's cute."

"Well, yeah, he is cute. And he's always so polite. And he's pretty good at working around the shrine. And..."

Everyone went 'Oooh!' as she began to recount the details. When Rei glared at them, they burst out laughing.

"How far have you gotten?"

"Have you kissed him yet?"

"Have you met his family?"

"When are we going to meet him?"

"Is it true your grandfather asked him to sleep over?"

"When are you getting engaged?"

"Does he have a nice butt?"

"QUIET!!"

"Better, much better. It's not like that. Ranma's a nice boy. He's... Well, he's not exactly quiet or shy or anything, but... But he's so... Well, he's quiet and shy and everything. "That didn't make any sense, did it?"

Everyone shook their heads in perfect unison. "Um, let me see. Ranma's... complex. He's outgoing and lively and always energetic. Always energetic, arg, I don't know how he can be so bright in the mornings. But... At the same time, he's always a bit quiet and distant. I suppose it's because he's such a perfect gentleman. He's always polite to me, and never tries anything, even when we're alone."

"Well, you seem to be doing all right with him. You're on a first name basis already, aren't you?"

"Hmm, sort of. Even on the first day I was calling him 'Ranma', it's just so easy. But he's always so polite to me. I don't think he's ever called me anything else aside from 'Rei-san'."

Seeing her friend starting to get a little misty eyed about a boy she obviously had one-way feelings for, Ami interjected. "Enough about Rei-chan, how are you going to track down this mystery man of yours, Mako-chan?"

Rei smiled her thanks for the help. Her friends meant well, but to be honest, they tended to gossip like a bunch of school girls... There was a good reason for that though.

In yet another part of Tokyo, someone was making a name for herself. The tall, good looking dojo destroyer was systematically visiting every dojo, beating the stuffing out of everyone foolish enough to challenge her. Leaving a trail weeks long, a string of dojo from the west coast the heart of Tokyo bore the signs of her passing, broken signs, and unconscious champions. The only reasoning anyone had was her horrific war-cry. Hundreds of people now recognised it as a sound to be feared, and lived in anticipation of the next time they may hear the words:

"Shampoo challenge!"

Shampoo looked around the suburb as she contemplated her next move. She had been sent to Japan to find a husband, and she would not fail. Fighting strength was everything in the village that she came from. Fighting strength was what made the Amazons great, and fighting strength was what enabled them to live to this day.

Coming from a long and proud line of warriors, she knew deep within her soul the power of having a strong husband, and the curse you inflicted on your children by having a weak man. Shampoo's father had been the strongest male in the village in his day. Some people even spread rumours that her mother had lost the fight because she loved him, but her parents had squashed those rumours; literally.

Her mother was the strongest maiden in the village, as was her mother before her. Shampoo was the strongest of this generation, and her great grandmother was still the Matriarch of the village. It was a job that Shampoo wanted some day, and for that she needed a strong husband, to make her a real woman. As with all of the other hard and important work in the village, it was a woman's job to provide for the strength of the village's future. For that she needed a strong husband.

All the men in the village fell before her might. When she had won the Martial Tournament a few months ago, she had systematically defeated every single man in the village. Not only was it their duty to fight when challenged, but Shampoo's beauty and expected political future guaranteed all the suitors gave their all.

All tried, and all failed.

There was only one thing to do when you can beat the best that are on offer: find some more offers. Everyone knew that they only men worth the effort in the area were the Musk. Neither the Joketsuzoku or the Musk had any fancy for the idea of intermarriage, so a quest was mandated. In the past great warriors had journeyed far and wide in search of suitable material to strengthen their bloodlines. She would do no less.

Picking up on rumours, Shampoo had finally come to Japan. A land

fabled for it's great warriors, Ninja and Samurai, a land where people were dedicated to the art of fighting. Here she would find the warrior who would defeat her, and she would sweep him off his feet and back to China.

Japan seemed like another failure. She had been searching high and low. From one school to another she sought the strongest on offer, and then defeated them. Was she too good? Was she really the pinnacle of Amazon breeding, too strong for ordinary men to defeat?

Shampoo sniffed in misery. Some of the men had given her a run for her money, they had challenged her, and pushed her to her limits, but in the end they failed too. Amazon strength, combined with speed and her knowledge of their secret techniques triumphed every time. Perhaps... just perhaps she would need to give a little in one fight. She would ask Great-grandmother. She would know. She knew everything.

Before her the door of the next dojo opened. Looking at the class that was assembled, she saw that news of her progress was spreading. By the number of black belts, and the healthy figures on the men, these were the best they had to offer. They would not be enough.

"Shampoo challenge!"

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> End Of Chapter <p>

#### 14. Another One Bites The Dust

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This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

This story is dedicated to the letters J and B and the number 007.

Visit my website at  
> dzillman@ozemail.com.au<br>  
<http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>

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> \

> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/

What has gone before:

> While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only

be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages. Having finally returned to Japan after 400 years of travel and experience, Ranma is trying to make a new life.<p>

Ranma's (or Tomoe Hotaru as his girl half is known) does not seem capable of having a normal life. He is learning Shinto from Hino Rei, pursued by the boy starved girls of the Sailor Senshi and simply pursued by the enraged demon-pig Ryoga. Just when he was worrying that there were no good martial artists in Tokyo, a certain Amazon arrives claiming the same thing.

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> Another One Bites The Dust<br> -----

The dreams were getting more annoying. In four hundred years of life, Ranma had seen enough nightmares to recognise the signs of tampering and intrusion.

When he had trained in India, he had the pleasure of training under a dream walker. A dream walker was someone who could cast their spirit into another person's dreams, and talk to them or influence the dream. What he was seeing did not bear those sorts of signs.

His work in Tibet, where the Monks taught him magic and demonology ensured a solid knowledge of those subjects too. When he had first started having these sorts of dreams - around the same time Ryoga showed up - he leapt to the obvious conclusion that it was his demonic friend that was to blame.

Ranma had lain his traps well. He had meticulously constructed a layer of demon traps and dream wards. It took him two days to build them, and most of an evening to place them, and when he was finished, he was sure that no demon should be able to pass such defences without at least raising an alarm.

While a greater demon, or a force of demons would definitely be able to pound their way through, they would leave definite signs, and he would be aware and able to counter attack. There was simply no way for Ryoga to be able to attack him with his dreams the way they stood.

That night, secure and snug in her bed, little Tomoe Hotaru had dreamed again, waking bathed in sweat, and thinking of a Queen of radiant beauty and kindness. All the wards were in place, and no sign of demons.

If 100 years as a Monk had taught him nothing else, it was patience (actually, this was one thing that it failed to teach him, but he was better than when he was young). Starting from scratch, he rebuilt all his wards, and again placed them. He included every charm he could think of, and even placed a few of the wards that Rei had created while they were training together.

Before he went to bed this evening, he erected the most powerful magical barrier that he could. It would take a mighty spell indeed to break through, and considering it had taken him two hours to cast, he should have some notice when things attacked. About the only thing which could break through without a fight would be the Kami, and even



some of them would think twice.

That night, Ranma dreamed.

It was a simple metal shaft. Nearly eight foot long, and a plain, dull grey in colour. His wife looked down on his work and smiled, and he smiled back. When Queen Serenity had healed him, she did not really change who he was, she just helped to quieten the voices that he heard. She let the calm and love of his wife enter his soul even deeper, and let his love enter his wife.

No-one had really expected the results of this however, aside from his wife. Before the healing, she had always said he was talented, and in touch with the magic of the universe. Now everyone would be able to see it.

His ability did not lay in casting the great magic which ran the Kingdom. His lay in the ability to feel the subtle changes and effects of the magic around him. The very day that he had been healed, he had walked the halls of their castle, marvelling at how the magic infused everything. Showing a flower to his lovely wife, he looked in her purple eyes and told her of it's beauty. When he described the way the magic touched the flower, melded with it, and was born anew by the life of the flower, she could only sigh in awe.

His was a great talent, and if he had the patience for it, he could have been a great scholar, imparting great wisdom to the world. However, he was a fighter, a man who was of short temper and quick, strong feelings. He was more apt to burn a book than read it, and the idea of helping those people who had hurt and tormented him for most of his life held little appeal.

Only two people held his loyalty. His wife, and his Queen. As the time had past since his healing, he had travelled the Kingdom, watching as it's magical defenders had wielded their powers to defend and protect. When his Queen had called, he had gone, and he had served, as only he could.

Now he had found a way that he could do something for his wife. Ever since he had met her, he had felt like a whole man, and had found peace and love. All he had been able to give her had been a return of that peace and love. It was all she ever asked, but now he could give her more.

Looking down at the plain iron shaft, he smiled up at his wife. "With this, I shall craft you a magical item like no other in the system."

His wife settled back and picked up her book. Every day for a month he had come down to their cellar to stare at the metal rod. Plain iron, that was all it was, nothing more, nothing less. She loved and trusted her husband, but she also worried about him. One day, while he was out, she called in a powerful mage that worked in her castle. Plain iron, that was all it was, nothing more.

After this had been going on for three weeks, she had finally turned to the one person she loved and could trust in the same way she trusted her husband. Stepping into the entry room, she bowed to Queen Serenity.

"Arise, please, there is no need for such formality between friends."

"Your Majesty. I... I'm worried about my husband. I know you cast a healing on him, but... But recently he had been acting strangely. Could, could I ask you to visit us some time, please. If you could see him... He had become so serious, so obsessed."

The Queen smiled and stepped down of her throne. Walking up to the smaller woman, she took her by the hand and strolled around the boundary of the vacant reception hall. "Let me guess. He has become obsessed with a piece of metal. Plain iron if I am not mistaken."

She gasped at her Queen. To know such things, she must be one step closer to divinity than anyone ever suspected. The Queen laughed at her subject's amazement. "No, it wasn't a vision, I don't have any special new powers. He's been to see me, you know."

"He has?"

"He has. Four times in the last month. The first time, he just walked in here, ignoring all of the guards and stood here all day. All he did was watch me and stared at the Moon Sceptre. I can tell you that the King was just a little bit nervous."

"He was back two days later. Just walked straight in again and wandered up to the throne. Sailor Jupiter was giving a report at the time. I'm sure you can understand how happy she was."

"When Jupiter was finished, the two of us adjourned to a private room, and he showed me the most marvellous painting I have ever seen. There was every colour imaginable, and it was beautiful beyond description. Somehow, he had painted the Moon Sceptre, but he had painted the \_magic\_ of the Sceptre, not it's outwards appearance."

"'Is it right?' He asked me. When I finally realised what it was he was showing me, I studied the Sceptre. All I could see was the strongest currents in the painting, the greatest lines of power. He had drawn them all, detail so minute it must have taken the finest of brushes to paint."

Queen Serenity sighed and thought of that day. The painting still existed. It was in her private office, where no-one visited. Perhaps some day the painting would allow them to duplicate the powers in the Moon Sceptre if they needed to.

"He only came twice more, and then he came to watch me cast, not to ask any more questions. I think he realised that I could not see the magic in the detail that he could. He has no real magic of his own, but his sight! It is truly incredible."

"The first time he came was to watch me cast a healing. The second time was to watch me when I destroyed an asteroid which was approaching. Both times he was here before I cast the spells, despite the fact that I had not told anyone of my intentions. He said he could see the magic gathering, as though for a great purpose."

"It was that second time that I enquired of his interest. He said that he was making you a staff. A special staff that would stand you true in the test of time, and be with you always."

"Plain iron he said. The bane of all magic I told him. He only smiled at me and touched his nose. I don't know what he has planned, but I look forward to seeing the results."

Her questions answered, and her fears laid to rest, she let the Queen lead her to the exit. With one hand on the door, Queen Serenity paused and looked at her again. "I asked my advisors about it, not mentioning any names. They said that no magical staff could possibly be constructed from iron. Iron is the antithesis of magic, it is the pure elemental earth, the metal which breaks and dispels."

"They also told me that to create a magical item requires great magic yourself. The Moon Sceptre was created long, long ago at the founding of the Moon Kingdom. Legend states that twelve great mages forged it with their life, giving all their power so that it would exist to serve forever more."

"I look forward to seeing what he makes. I should be something... special."

She looked up with a sudden start. A loud bang of metal on metal brought her back from her memories. After a month of sitting and staring at the rod of iron, he had done something. The sound was the first strike of his hammer as he beat the metal. As she saw him heat the iron and strike again, she realised how long it could take.

It did take a long time, almost two years to complete, but it was a labour of love. As time wore on, she could begin to see the shape coming out of what was being produced. Over time he would roll it and fold it, layer upon layer upon layer. At times, he would spend weeks carving intricate channels in the heat softened metal, only to fold the iron again, and bury them within.

Every time she would broach the subject he would only smile and say he was creating her a gift of his love. It was to be a reminder of her love for him, and his love for her. When it was complete, all would see the power of their love.

It was two days since she had been down to the cellar. The last time she was there, he had cheerfully folded a magnificent sword back onto itself, and beaten it back into a shaft. By the time they had left for bed, he was left with a shaft almost exactly the same as he had started with.

She was tending the flowers in her garden, healing the sick ones, and pampering the healthy when she heard footfalls behind her. Surprised when she saw her husband, her jaw almost hit the ground when she saw what he was carrying.

It was eight foot tall, an almost completely plain staff, topped with a pair of wicked looking blades. She did not know what it was, but there was no way that he could have created something so... perfect... in two days.

He smiled even wider and posed before her, weapon held beside him. "In the last two years, I taught the metal. I forged the metal, and

built in all of the tracks by which the magic flows. The metal is not just in the shape of the weapon, it is the weapon. To the very heart of the metal, every gram of it's substance is the weapon.

"When I finally brought the weapon to the outside, and gave it exterior form, it was just the same as polishing a gem stone. The work was done, it was only the final gloss that was needed."

"This is a weapon like no other in the Kingdom. Every other weapon carries the power inside it. This is a lens. A lens for your spirit."

"Others fear your power because they think you have great magic. I say it is not the greatness of the magic, but the purity of your soul. You have the strength of the heart that is needed to do the greatest of tasks."

"Using this as a focus, your powers will be magnified enormously. Because it is iron, it is also the ultimate magical shield. When you use this, you will always know it is as unique as our love. I would not, could not, ever create its equal for anyone else."

He offered it to her and she took it carefully. It was heavy, a solid weapon, of solid iron, no wood or crystal anywhere. It was simple in appearance, and completely devoid of decoration. Try as she might, she could also not sense any magic in it. The weapon was as dead as any other piece of iron.

But he said it was a lens. Gently, carefully, she gave the slightest tracing of soul, her heart, her spirit, her power, into her hand, and channelled it through the weapon. When she felt the massive power which coursed through the staff, she almost dropped it in shock. It was a lens of amazing proportions.

She looked at him, and their eyes met, his blue-grey locked with her purple. As ever, she looked into him, and felt the bottomless pit of love which he had. This time he had something new. Pride.

"Sailor Saturn," he intoned formally. "May I present the Silence Glaive."

Hotaru awoke, looking around the room in wide eyed horror. All the seals were in place. All the wards untampered. Nothing had even tried to disturb his sleep. That fact alone worried her even more that the substance of the dream. Because if the dreams did not come from without...

Hotaru was worried again, and the fact that she was worried, worried her even more. Worry was bad, it ate away at the soul, it distracted you, blurred your aura, and slowed you down in a fight. Worry was the enemy of the mind, and life had taught her that you need a clear mind at all times. The only thing to do at a time like this is hit something.

Hmm, there was still school to go today, and she was supposed to train with Rei-san tonight... Better have a quick workout in the garage. Heading past the kitchen she waved hello to Kaolinite... No, wait, she was calling herself Kaori now.

"I'm going to the garage for a bit... I'll be back in a couple of hours before school."

The woman smiled and kept putting together a fancy breakfast for her 'father'. Hotaru shrugged. She had seen love in enough people to know what it looked like. It looked like Kaori had fallen quiet heavily for Tomoe Souichi, and it looked like she was really trying to catch him.

If Hotaru had really be his daughter, she might have felt something: jealousy or happiness, but she was really just a boarder in the house, so she was happy to watch the melodrama unfold. He hoped that she would succeed. He too had been in love once, and he knew just how special it was.

In the garage little Hotaru ignored the restrictions she imposed to fit into the act that she played, and concentrated on training. After going through a few of the most basic Kata to calm her mind, she closed her eyes and relaxed. Standing dead still in the middle of the garage, she slowly eased all of the constraints she placed on her aura.

Her Ki - developed over hundreds of years of intense training - slowly expanded as she relaxed. Normally she showed only the weak spirit of someone feeble and untrained, but this was just because she continually exerted a large force to keep her 'soul' from expanding to it's proper proportions.

Part way through the relaxation, she began to glow faintly, nothing more than a faint blue outline to her body. As she continued to relax, the aura grew, becoming fully visible to the naked eye of even the most untrained. When she was finished she stood proud, glowing bright enough to hurt anyone looking directly, a sphere of glowing blue power centred around her naval, and taking up as much space as a small car.

She rarely let herself relax like this these days. It was too easy for people to see her, and if a little healing scared them, what would they think of a human firefly? So thinking, she cast a minor levitation spell and slowly began to circle the room. Around and around she went, raising the spell to true flight to allow her some acrobatics.

After a time she started casting small fireballs, and shooting them down with Ki blasts. A flagrant waste of mana and Ki, it was beautiful none the less. All around the room, lights flew and burst, like fireworks on the Emperor's birthday.

All too soon there was a knock at the door. Killing her spells and quenching her Ki, Hotaru dropped the last couple of feet to the ground. Even as Kaori opened the door, the blue light was fading, and the last sparks were fading into the darkness. Smiling at the confused looking woman, Hotaru slipped past her to go for breakfast. 'I wonder what she thinks she saw? And by the looks of it, hitting things is not the only way to relax.'

School was school was school. Suffice it to say that too many hours of mindless suffering were only mitigated by the few classes she enjoyed, and the times when she did not have to think about the other students.

Changing after school, Ranma made a phone call. "Hino-sensei, this is Ranma. Can you tell Rei-san that something has come up, and I will be a bit late... Thanks... See you around seven... Yes... Bye"

That over and done with, Ranma could afford a little more time for some recreation. He had tried half a dozen dojo by now, and no-one really measured up to the standards that he would require of his own students, let alone their teachers. Tonight would be a little different. Tonight he was just going to try the simple tactic of calling out a challenge to the dojo, and find out how strong they were.

He was at his second dojo and had just called out his challenge when the sensei walked up to him. He was an old man, well into his eighties, and looked every year of it. He even walked the way you would expect an eighty year old would.

"Sir, I am the last Sensei of this dojo. I only teach self defence for school children, and some exercise classes for the old folk like me in the area. I ask that you may forgive me for declining your challenge."

Ranma looked at the old man. He couldn't be more than four and a half foot tall, stooped and withered, but his face held pride. Pride and determination. Ranma bowed.

"Sensei, of all the dojo I have fought, yours is the only one I can respect. There is no dishonour in growing old, there is only honour and respect. When I grow too old to challenge others, I can only hope that I may still be respected as you are, to be trusted with the lives and learning of the future of our country, and the lives and wisdom of the past."

"I have always been told that true strength comes not from muscle, but from brains and the wisdom to use it."

"I would beg of the Master the wisdom to learn at his feet, and to assist his school, teaching what I may."

The old man nearly fell over. Too often in the past he had seen these brash young men come in, seeking to prove something. All too often they had shown scorn, not realising that they too would be this way some time in the future.

Now he had a fine young man in front of him. A fighter by all indication. A man who wished to learn at his feet and teach at his side. If the man was as good as he implied, the future of the dojo was assured, at least until his grandson was old enough to take over. The man returned Ranma's bow and accepted his offer.

Even as he spoke, the doors opened and a stunning young woman with long locks of luscious blue hair stepped in. When the two men faced her, she pointed at Ranma. "Shampoo challenge!"

Facing his new teacher, Ranma smiled. "Sensei, if you do not mind, I shall take the lady's offer. Hopefully I shall show you that I am worthy of assisting your school."

Turning back to the girl, she glared at him. "Less talk, more

fight!"

Ranma smiled. As soon as he settled into a defensive stance, the woman leapt at him. Backing up quickly, Ranma dodged a flurry of kicks and punches. Finding himself backed against a wall, Ranma jumped and bounced off the ceiling to land behind her.

Even as he moved, she retaliated with surprising speed. Moments before his feet touched the floor, she struck, launching a trio of side kicks at him. He blocked them all, but was stunned. Finally a formidable opponent! A woman of skill, someone to challenge his abilities somewhat.

They danced together for a few more moments, closing and retreating. While her offensive skills were superb, her defence left much to be desired. Then again, she seemed fast enough to be able to defeat most opponents before they could strike at her. Finally seeing an opening too good to miss, he snaked out a foot to trip her.

Shampoo of course expected this and jumped over it. Knowing that his next move was one of several logical follow-ups, she blocked two and evaded a third. It was the forth attack, a repeat of the initial foot sweep which took her down. Martial Arts at this level was a lot like chess, it was a matter of how many moves ahead you could plan. Actually, it was more like a physical version of chess, with more dimensions, fewer pieces, and lots of pain... but the analogy still holds.

Shampoo lifted herself back to her feet and growled at the man. He stood there so calm, hardly even breathing heavily, while she was giving her utmost. Could this be a man to beat her? Never! She would never give in! It was not just a warriors body which allowed her to win, it was her knowledge. Shampoo was backed by 3000 years of Amazon tradition and knowledge.

Taking positions again, the two closed and began to play. After just a few moments, Shampoo was close enough, and launched her attack. "KACHUU TENSHIN AMAGURIKEN!"

Instantly, he arms became blurs as she launched over two hundred punches at him. None could stand before the power of Amazon techniques. It was true, even as he moved and blocked to his greatest, Ranma could not stop them all, and almost a dozen blows rained down onto his body, throwing him back, crashing into a wall.

"Aiya! Shampoo win!"

Then the body moved, and Ranma climbed back to his feet. The side of his face was a bit red where she struck once, but other than that, he looked fine. "No yet. Not by a long shot. I wanted to keep this nice: just straight out fighting. If you want to bring special attacks into it, you're in for a real shock."

Again they closed, and Ranma could almost weep at how open Shampoo left herself. All she could see was the power of her own attack, never realising that her opponent may be her equal or superior. After all, someone that could block almost all of her Chestnut Fist without using a special attack...

This time when she called out her attack, he called at the same time, and that was the end. In the second that she had, Shampoo threw exactly ninety eight punches; Ranma counted them. He also blocked them. One handed. While punching her, blow for blow. And while holding back from full speed and power.

Shampoo gradually awoke, feeling like she had been beaten all over with a baseball bat. Actually, that was not quite right. Not all over, the man - the victor - had somehow been careful with his blows. Not once had he struck her pretty face. Not once had he hit the tender flesh of her breasts. No where else had been spared, but all of the most painful, vulnerable points had been missed. She sighed happily. Not only was her husband incredibly skilled, he was caring and compassionate.

Hearing her sigh, her husband and the old man came over to where she lay resting on the floor. Opening her large eyes fully, she took in his handsome face and sighed again. She really was lucky. Latching on to his neck, she said the only words that mattered. "Wo da Airen."

Ranma looked at the girl askew. She was holding him around the neck and purring in a most disturbing fashion. Since she spoke in Chinese and seemed to have a heavy accent, he decided to try that language. <"I'm sorry Miss, I'm not your husband. My name is Ranma. Do you have a concussion?">

<"Aiya! You speak Chinese! You defeated me in combat, so you now must marry me. It's the law">

<"What? What sort of law is that?">

Shampoo pulled out her trusty Amazon law book and opened it to the correct page. It was a well worn page, she had read it many times trying to find a loophole. Fortunately, it did say defeat, not just 'give a decent challenge' otherwise she may have weakened and married some lesser man. She was glad she waited.

Ranma read the rule and his eyes went wide. 'I did not want to get in to this sort of thing.' Flipping over to the front, he looked at the cover. 'Joketsuzoku Book Of Law, Third Revision, Published 1802'.<"Revised addition? What is this garbage? Here!">

Pulling out his own copy - 'First Edition, Date Unknown' - he opened it to the relevant page and pointed out the paragraph saying that an Amazon need not marry another Amazon after a challenge unless the fact that it was a marriage challenge was stated clearly before hand.

<"Silly husband! You're not an Amazon. See, this page.">

<"Are you a Joketsuzoku Amazon, or do you just carry their Book Of Law?">

<"I am a proud Amazon.">

<"Then I don't have to marry you. Unless I have been cast out by a full Council of Mistresses, I am still an Amazon.">

<"Silly husband! You think you know some of our laws and can confuse



me? Never! Only a Mistress requires a full Council to be cast out, and I knew all the Mistresses before I left. You are not a Mistress, you are not an Amazon. So, you are now my husband!">

Ranma mumbled under his breath and checked the time. Damn, almost time to meet Rei-san. I don't have time for this. "Shampoo, I am a Amazon. I am not your husband, and I have to go. Nice fighting you."

While Shampoo hesitated, trying to switch back to her faulty Japanese, he stood up and left the hall. Seeing her husband leaving without her, she too rose, fighting off the weakness of being pummelled into unconscious just fifteen minutes prior. Seeing him leap to a roof she followed, and managed to keep up for most of the way. Then he dropped down to the street and vanished.

She went to where she last saw him, but there was no longer any sign. After prowling the streets and yards for almost two hours, she could not see him. But she knew where he was, roughly. She knew her man, she knew his description, and there was no way that she would let such a perfect mate pass through her fingers. Time to get some help.

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> End Of Chapter <p>

## 15. There Is A Time For Talking...

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><br>This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

><br>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

><br>This story is dedicated to the letters \n and the number 0.

><br>

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><br>What has gone before:

><br>While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages. Having finally returned to Japan after 400 years of travel and experience, Ranma is trying to make a new life.

><br>Ranma's (or Tomoe Hotaru as his girl half is known) does not seem capable of having a normal life. He is learning Shinto from Hino Rei, pursued by the boy starved girls of the Sailor Senshi and simply pursued by the enraged demon-pig Ryoga. Just when he was worrying that there were no good martial artists in Tokyo, a certain Amazon arrives claiming the same thing. Well, one thing led to another and can you say "Amazon Law"?

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>There Is A Time For Talking...<br>

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><br> Wednesday afternoon seemed destined to be a time for important conversations. In various parts of the city revealing conversations were taking place, and would have defining significance to all of the people involved. For some they were discussions of the future, and others discussions of the past. Naturally enough, there were also likely to be misunderstandings...

><br> Haruka looked at her friend and sighed. Michiru had been quiet all day, and since they returned to her place from school, she had been sitting at her easel. She was not painting, nor was she reviewing any of her previous work. For the last two hours, she had just sat there, chin on hand, and a slight frown creasing her pretty brow.

><br> Finally she could stand it no more. Walking over behind her, Haruka brushed aside some of the soft green hair and placed a hand on the girls shoulder. Leaning down, she whispered in her ear and asked her what was wrong.

><br> Michiru felt the warm air brushing her cheek and blushed slightly. The touch, the smell, the sound, the whole presence of Haruka so close to her was almost enough to make her forget about everything. But it was only almost. Tilting her head, she placed a soft kiss on the hand holding her shoulder, then she rested her cheek on it.

><br> "Oh, Haruka. I don't know. Sometimes... Sometimes it just seems

so hard. So... cold and clinical. I just wish there was a better way."

><br> "I know what you mean. We've discussed it before: we didn't like it then, and neither of us like it now. Unless someone comes up with a better plan, I really don't know what else we can do."

><br> "I don't know either but---"

><br> Haruka forced some iron into her voice. "No 'but's. There's someone out there trying to find the three talismans, and destroy the world. What choice do we have?"

><br> "None, I suppose. It just seems so callous. We're supposed to be the defenders of the Moon Kingdom, and here we are plotting to kill three of its subjects."

><br> "No, we're not planning on killing them. If it wasn't for the Witches who are sending the Daimons, we could let them live in peace. But so long as the Daimons keep attacking, we have to get those talismans first."

><br> They sighed in unison and stood there for a while. Recently Setsuna had returned and told them of her discoveries about their enemy. The three talismans were hidden within the heart crystals of three pure and noble people. When the three talismans were combined, they would form the holy grail.

><br> In the right hands, the holy grail could restore life, in the wrong hands... It could mean the end of the world. When the stakes were this high, the three Sailor Senshi had vowed that they would let nothing and no-one stand in the way of their recovering the talismans first. If they or their Queen possessed the Talismans, then the end would justify the means. If the enemy possessed the Holy Grail, it could only spell disaster.

><br> A polite cough brought them back from their thoughts, and they looked around to see Setsuna standing behind them. Haruka scowled. "How long have you been there?"

><br> "Long enough."

><br> "Long enough for what?"

><br> She just smiled enigmatically. Setsuna had only arrived moments ago actually. But since she was the guardian of the Gates Of Time, everyone assumed that she could pick and choose exactly when she would be somewhere. She had some hard and fast rules about using her powers, and one of them expressly forbade unnecessary time travel.

She had never broken them willingly, and she saw no reason to jump all through the time stream just so she could catch people in embarrassing situations.

><br> Catching people in situations like these was fun however, and her sharp mind easily picked the most likely topics for the two girls to be discussing in such a serious manner. Hmm, the Holy Grail or Sailor Saturn. Sailor Saturn or the Holy Grail. Oh when, take a guess and lets see. How about another enigmatic smile, that last one was fun.

><br> "So far I can be sure that none of the Talismans have been found. I realise that all of us are willing to sacrifice ourselves to retrieve the Talismans, but the question will always stay open: are you willing to sacrifice someone else?"

><br> Michiru sighed. With an answer like that, she might have been spying on them for the last hour. "We are. Neither of us like it, but considering the alternative, I guess it's acceptable for people to die."

><br> "No! No, it is never acceptable to kill other people. It may be necessary, but it is not acceptable. That is an important difference. Always remember it, because when the necessary becomes accepted, you may find yourself becoming what you would oppose."

><br> The pair looked chastised for a moment after her words. After she had digested their meaning, Michiru changed the topic slightly. "What have you heard about Sailor Saturn?"

><br> Setsuna winced internally, but outwardly she paused only briefly, as though weighing what she could tell them. How were you supposed to maintain an aura of infallibility and omniscience when people asked loaded questions like that?

><br> "What would you like to know?"

><br> "Well, do you know if she is going to be awakening?"

><br> "Yes."

><br> Time ticked by. After a while, they realised that she was not going to expand on it. Eventually Michiru asked for some more detail.

><br> "Sailor Saturn will definitely awaken, it is all a question of when." Now that was the understatement of all time. Sailor Pluto knew that Saturn was supposed to be awake at some point in Crystal Tokyo, but that was over a thousand years in the future. She was not sure if

Saturn was going to awaken right now, in a week, or in a thousand years. If she played her cards right, people might think she knew... and that was almost as good. She continued to speak.

><br> "I have felt... stirrings. I know that Sailor Saturn is not awake yet, but I cannot say which girl is destined to be her. When she does awake, you must realise that she could be the greatest asset or the greatest threat we can face. It is all a matter of how she see the threat which the world faces."

><br> There was something more that she wanted to tell them, but she held back. It would hardly fit her image if she was seen to be asking for help. Perhaps she could have them beg her to let them help. Deciding this, she let a small, almost pensive, frown cross her forehead.

><br> The ever observant Michiru was the first to spot it. "There's something more, isn't there, Setsuna. There's something you are not telling us. Please, let us help. I know we can help."

><br> After looking like she thought it over, she nodded her head and smiled. "Very well. While I was at the Gates Of Time, I was watching for signs of her power, in case she awoke. The magical energy of the Sailor Senshi is very distinctive. Several times in the past week, I have seen brief flashes of Silver Millennium energy. Energy distinctive to Sailor Saturn."

><br> "Someone out there is trying to access her power. Someone is trying to gain the power of Sailor Saturn without being her. We must be vigilant against this new threat."

><br> The others just stared at her. Saturn might be Senshi of creation and destruction, but Pluto seemed to be the Senshi of bad news. What else could go wrong?

><br> Oddly enough, it was just a few hours earlier that Chiba Mamoru was asking almost exactly the same thing as he arrived breathlessly at the front of Small Lady's school. First he had been delayed leaving work, then the busses were all full, and finally the one he had caught did not stop where he wanted it to. He had been planning to get here half an hour early so he could sit in the sun and read. As it was, he only arrived with a few minutes to spare.

><br> Looking around Mamoru noted that there seemed to be only one other person waiting at this gate. Fit looking guy, in black pants and a red shirt. Looked a couple of years younger than he was. Perhaps he was coming to meet a sister or cousin at the school. Mamoru laughed on the inside. People would have a fit if they realised the truth about Small Lady and him. To think he was less than ten years older than her, but he was actually her father.

><br> The fact that she was actually from the future was not something that could openly be discussed. Better keep that in mind, he thought, because the guy was coming over to him. Now that he was closer, Mamoru could see that he was smiling in a slightly disturbing manner. Not only that, but he seemed to be incredibly fit, moving with all the lithe grace of a gazelle.

><br> When they were close enough the two men stood facing each other and sized the other up. After a moment, the stranger placed out his hand and smiled even wider. "I'm Tendo Ranma. You'd be Chiba Mamoru, wouldn't you?"

><br> That was surprising. Few people recognised him, and it was something he liked to stay that way. "I'm Afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Tendo-San. You know who I am, but I am afraid I do not recognise your name."

><br> Ranma waved it off and leaned against a wall next to Mamoru. "Let's just say I'm a friend of Chibi-Usa and Usagi. I've been wanting to have a bit of a chat with you for a while actually."

><br> After that, the two stood silently, looking at the school and waiting for the bell to ring. Unexpectedly, Ranma spoke again. "You're dating Tsukino Usagi, aren't you."

><br> It came out as a statement rather than a question. Despite the tone of voice Ranma used, he felt compelled to answer. "Yes. I am. Usagi's a very close friend. I... We..."

><br> Ranma waved aside his attempt to explain how much he loved the girl. There was silence for a few moments again, then Mister Conversation struck again. "So you've been dating her for what? A year, a year and a half?"

><br> "Hmm, about a year and a half now."

><br> "Not bad. So, she would have been what? Fourteen? When you started going out. And you were twenty?"

><br> Mamoru ground his teeth. He had received his share of comments about dating someone Usagi's age. Her age did not change the love that they felt for each other. Besides, it's not as though they were actually doing anything physical when she was that young. "Yes, but our love is destined. A few years difference is nothing when you consider that we have the rest of our lives."

><br> "Hey, hey. Stay calm. I think Usagi's old enough to make up her own mind. She seems a pretty smart kid."

><br> Again there was silence. Mamoru was sure the man was deliberately needling, but for the life of him, he could not figure out why.

><br> "She's twelve."

><br> "What?"

><br> "Chibi-Usa. She's twelve."

><br> Mamoru smiled. He loved his daughter. He could not understand how he could bear to part with her in the future, but here and now, he was glad he did. "Yes. She is."

><br> Silence once more, and Ranma fidgeted slightly. Finally he decided something and pulled himself off the wall he was leaning on and spun to face Mamoru.

><br> "OK, Mamoru. Here's how it is. I've seen you around Chibi-Usa. You know, the hugs, the kisses. The way you're always watching her out of the corner of your eye when you're at the park. I don't care if Usagi's getting a bit too old for your tastes, but I'm asking you nicely. Please stay away from Chibi-Usa."

><br> Mamoru snarled. He didn't know how much Ranma had been watching them, or where he got his information, but there was no way he was going to stay away from his daughter. Mamoru was no slouch at fighting, and there was no way he was going to let some jock talk to him that way. He took a stance.

><br> "Listen, you. I love Chibi-Usa dearly. There's nothing you or anyone else can do to keep me away from her. So just get out of here! I don't know who you are, but I don't want you coming near her again. Do you understand me?"

><br> Ranma smiled. It was not the first time he had done something like this, and it probably would not be the last. The children are our future, and there was no way he was going to let a pervert like this guy sink his claws into a sweet kid like Chibi-Usa. "I accept your challenge."

><br> Suffice it to say that what followed was short, but not at all sweet. Faster than he believed possible, Mamoru received the beating of his life. He had studied a number of Martial Arts, and was quite capable of defending himself. Ranma worked him over as though he was standing still, and made it look easy.

><br> Had he been anyone other than Chibi-Usa's father, being bruised and beaten over most of his body would have scared him off. Since he

was her father, all it did was make him mad. Maddier than hell. If it wasn't for the fact that Ranma had dumped him into a large garbage bin, he would probably still be out there, taking more lumps, but trying to keep the stranger away from his little girl.

><br> As it was, all he could do was lie there and suffer. From inside the metal bin, all he could here was a few strange sounds, then the approach of girlish laughter. 'No, run.' He wanted to cry out, but he was too paralysed from pain to even attempt it.

><br> Even in his pain, he sighed in relief when he heard Small Lady saying hello to one of her friends. They chattered for a brief moment, before they decided to leave without him. Just as they set off, Chibi-Usa's friend said she needed to throw out some garbage. As the footfalls approached, he smiled. Here was someone who could rescue him, or get help.

><br> Looking up, he saw Tomoe Hotaru, a close friend of Small Lady. She was always so nice, so quiet, so polite. She would help him. But when he looked at those big purple eyes of hers, he shuddered. They were so cold, so full of anger. Looking down on him, she threw her garbage in. Her voice contained nothing but loathing:

><br> "Stinking paedophile."

><br> Sighing, he collapsed back into the garbage. Somehow, he was relieved. He had been worried about almost the same thing, but with this 'Ranma' fellow as the aggressor. Now it seems he was just a friend of Hotaru's. And she had acted on confusion and mistaken information. Sure, Ranma had gone a bit far, but it was nice to know that Chibi-Usa's friend was so caring and perceptive, even if miss-guided.

><br> As Small Lady and Hotaru walked down the street, they had none of these concerns. Hotaru was happy that her friend was safe, and hopefully Usagi's boyfriend would stay with her a bit longer, rather than seeking younger prey. Chatting happily, the two discussed their day at school and their plans for the night.

><br> Chibi-Usa was going to visit some of her friends. They were older than her by a few years, but they always treated her well. When Chibi-Usa mentioned that one of them was an excellent cook, and could well be enticed into doing the Japanese noodles that Hotaru fancied, it was easy to get her friend to join her.

><br> They had gone another block towards Chibi-Usa's friend Makoto's place when she posed a question to Hotaru. "Hey, where's that stick you're always caring?"

><br> "Huh? It's right... Oh, no! Damn! Where? Where? Calm down... Now where did I see it last? Ah! I know! Rei-san!"



><br> "Chibi-Usa, Do you know a girl called Hino Rei?"

><br> She bobbed cute little pink head. "Sure, she's one of the girls we were going to meet."

><br> Hotaru was amazed. Talk about coincidence. "Can we go there first? That staff an be very dangerous if she treats it wrong."

><br> Another nod. What a nice kid. "Do you know Rei?"

><br> "Well, sort of. Let's just say that the staff got left there by someone taking lessons from her."

><br> "Oh, do you know Ranma? Rei's always talking about him these days."

><br> Hotaru chuckled. "You could say that I know him pretty well. Come on, we better hurry. Do you want to lead?"

><br> Covering ground as fast as 'sick' little Hotaru could manage, the girls arrived at the shrine. Rei was surprised to see them, but when Chibi-Usa explained Hotaru's anxiousness about her staff, Rei was happy enough to call Makoto's and get everyone to come here.

><br> Looking out into the grounds of the shrine, Rei was surprised to see Hotaru had gone straight to where Ranma had left his staff the day before. Giving it only the shortest of inspections, she rejoined her friends and showed it to them.

><br> "See, found it!"

><br> "Hotaru-chan, isn't that Ranma's staff?"

><br> Hotaru nodded once. "Yes, Rei-san, but... It's also mine, really. It's a very special staff, and it was given to us many years ago. It shouldn't have been left here. I... Er, Ranma must have been pretty concerned yesterday when he left, otherwise he would have remembered it."

><br> Rei immediately felt guilty. Yesterday had been another one of the training sessions with Ranma that she had to cut short. Rushed off by her need to become a Senshi and save the world, she had managed to distress this innocent little girl. Blushing slightly, she resolved to try and give Ranma just that little extra time in the future.

><br> "Sorry, Hotaru-chan. That was probably my fault. I... Something came up and I had to rush Ranma out of here quickly."

><br> Seeing the distress she was putting Rei-san into, Hotaru searched for a change of topic. Anything... Ah! The staff: "Rei-san, did you know that this staff has a long history? There's a really interesting story about its past if your interested?"

><br> Rei and Chibi-Usa both said they were, but asked if she would wait until the rest of their friends arrived. She was sure that the other girls would like to hear about such an interesting staff. Hotaru nodded and they three moved into the kitchen to prepare things. Makoto would be doing the cooking tonight, but they were going to set things up to compensate for the sudden change in venues.

><br> Hotaru carried plates and things and felt sad for a moment. Preparing dinner with all these girls (for the other Inner Senshi were slowly filing in) reminded her of the first years after she met Akane. She hoped that Makoto was a good cook. Eating bad cooking was normally bad enough, but in a setting like this, she just knew it would remind her of Akane, and she would spend the whole night mourning her loss.

><br> Eventually the girls were all there, an excellent dinner was served, and everyone had eaten. Sitting around the table, drinking tea and chatting, Rei prompted Hotaru to tell the story of her staff.

><br> Placing the staff in the middle of the table, she balanced it on the base end. Everyone was surprised enough at this feat, but it did not take long for her words to have a riveting effect.

><br> "This staff was given to me in Tibet, long ago. The man who owned it before me was a Monk in a temple. He and his fellows guarded a magical gateway, a gateway which lead to another world. A world which had once been ruled by the very people who made this staff."

><br> "Once there was a great and wise race of people called the Sanjian. The Sanjian were just like you and me, but they developed tremendous magical powers."

><br> "Using their magical powers, the Sanjian created a new society, a Kingdom based on love, peace and harmony. They called this the Moon Kingdom."

><br> There were six simultaneous gasps at that revelation.

><br> "The Moon Kingdom was ruled by two people, their handsome and brave King, and their beautiful and kind Queen. Under their guidance, the whole Kingdom prospered, and evil was removed completely."

><br> "Eventually this was not enough for their King, Kai-An-Wang. Kai-An-Wang decided that he needed to defeat the evil for all time. Leaving the Kingdom in the care of his wife, Queen Serenity, King Kai-An-Wang opened a portal to another dimension. A dimension full of

evil."

><br> "Legend has it that he battled the evil so long, that eventually he became the evil. Then he began to crave the power that he once had, but he was no longer the man he used to be."

><br> "The Dark Lord Kai-An-Wang found himself locked from the Moon Kingdom by the very dimensional barrier he had helped to create. In fury, he contacted the weak willed, those people in the Moon Kingdom who he could easily sway."

><br> "Under the promise of great power, the Dark Lord Kai-An-Wang's evil servants attacked the Queen and her warriors and almost defeated them. Using the last of her power, good Queen Serenity sealed the Dark Lord Kai-An-Wang and his servants away in this dimension, a place of evil called the Negaverse."

><br> "And there they stay to this very day."

><br> Suddenly everyone seemed to suffer from a coughing and choking fit. Hotaru looked around curiously. Few people believed the tale of magic, evil, sacrifice and good triumphant, but she had never received a reaction like this before.

><br> The Senshi on the other hand were trying to contain themselves. They knew the story of the Moon Kingdom because they had been there, or their previous lives anyway. The fact that someone completely unrelated remembered the Kingdom said vast quantities about it, if they could remember the love that Queen had for her subjects even after all this time.

><br> The fact that the tale was slightly wrong, and it was the Senshi of this era which had defeated the legions of Negaverse when they broke free of their banishment was something they felt Hotaru would be safer not knowing. The cause of the mysterious demon attacks all those months ago was hardly common knowledge.

><br> When everyone calmed down, Hotaru resumed her story.

><br> "That explains the origin of the staff, but it's purpose is something else again. While the Queen and her warriors were the most powerful magically, many people in that time were in touch with the powers of the world."

><br> "This belonged to a man of no great importance, his name now lost to history. It is a spirit staff, and inside the staff lives my best friend: Takuhi."

><br> Rei looked at the staff in greater interest. There were all

sorts of strange carvings on it, generally in a language she did not understand. "So what's your friend? A white ant?"

><br> "Heh, heh! Rei-san, you're so funny! No, Takuhi is a spirit creature. He's my best friend. Whenever I'm alone, he's there to talk to. He never gets upset with me, and he's always nice."

><br> Usagi smiled. Small Lady had told her about how Hotaru was treated at school. It must be nice to have an imaginary friend when everyone picked on you. "Can we see Takuhi?"

><br> "Now? I really don't think that would be a good idea..."

><br> "I understand. We probably wouldn't be able to see him, right?"

><br> "No. It's just that this is a temple. Do you have any idea how the wards on a place like this can hurt a spirit creature?"

><br> Usagi shook her head. This kid had an answer to everything. She was going to speak up and say they would see her 'friend' some other time when Hotaru continued.

><br> "Rei-san? Can you make a zone of null-warding?"

><br> "A what?"

><br> "Err, it's sort of a hole in your wards. If you can do that around the table, I can bring out Takuhi!"

><br> Rei thought for a moment. Hmm, tricky. But, yes... possible. She eyed up Hotaru. Obviously hanging around with Ranma, the other owner of the staff, had managed to teach her something. Getting some ink and paper, Rei set to work, concentrating on remembering what wards were active, and how she could block or deflect them in a small area.

><br> "So, Hotaru-chan. You seem to know Ranma pretty well. Is it your staff or his?"

><br> "Err, it belongs to either of us really. Takuhi recognises me easily."

><br> "I can see a bit of a family resemblance. Are you his little sister?"

><br> Damn! Hotaru hated being asked that question. It was so hard to answer it honestly without telling everything. Since Mistress 9's cure was now only weeks away, she really did not want to tell them about her curse. She also like Rei-san, so there was no way she wanted to lie to her. "Ummm. Well, Ranma and I have the same parents, I'll let you draw your own conclusions."

><br> Rei looked at her oddly. A simple 'yes' would have sufficed. A few moments later she was finished and offered Hotaru the space to start her demonstration. Strangely, Hotaru seemed to look at her charms, casting an evaluating eye over them. No... she was too young to know that much; Rei was still in the process of learning how all the wards worked around the shrine.

><br> Finishing her exam - satisfied that Takuhi would not be hurt by sloppy work - Hotaru leaned over the table and worked the carved top off the staff. As soon as the wooden bird's head was no longer plugging the hole, intense white light poured out, temporarily blinding everyone in the room. Moments later, 'it' dropped onto the table.

><br> Seeing 'it', six pairs of hands came out of pockets, releasing the henshin sticks they had grabbed as soon as the stick started to flare. 'It', no, Takuhi, was obviously no threat, and was now treating itself to a piece of left over fried egg.

><br> Takuhi was strange, and they all had to agree, it bore a distinct resemblance to some of the youma that they had fought. Takuhi was about the size of a budgie, maybe slightly larger. It was a deep rust-brown colour, and almost looked like a bird. It was feathered, and had three big gripping toes on it's foot, but that was where the similarity ended.

><br> Rather than two feet, Takuhi had but one, and this leg grew from the middle of it's body, looking perfect natural. His face was the main thing that differed from normal animals. His face was almost human. Large, expressive eyes looked out from a feathered brow, and if the teeth were not quite so long and pointy, he would have had quite a smile.

><br> Not everyone reacted the same way. Rei sat there stunned, while Makoto and Usagi seemed to on the wary edge of acceptance. Chibi-Usa was trying to pat him, but Takuhi seemed shy and preferred to be touched by Hotaru only. Ami watched with silent awe, and you could almost see her brain working overtime trying to fit this new piece of puzzle into her picture of the world. Minako on the other hand...

><br> Minako crawled backwards with fear and revulsion. It was hideous, a parody of bird and man. It scared, horrified and fascinated her all at the same time. "It's a monster!"

><br> Immediately Hotaru glared at her. "He is not a monster. I told

you, he's a spirit creature. Sure, he might not be as pretty as you are, but he's my best friend. He's caring and sensitive. He's protective, and he listens without judging. Whenever I've been alone he always listens to what I say. Anyone can be a monster, man or beast, it's all about their actions. Takuhi is NOT a monster!"

><br> Everyone was shocked at Hotaru's outburst. She was normally such a quiet girl, it was hard to believe she could be so aggressive. But then, if someone insulted one of their friends, they would get protective too.

><br> Takuhi hopped around the table, and eventually everyone came to look at him. If they reached in slowly, he allowed people to pat him, and his feathers were soft and beautiful to the touch. After playing with the spirit creature for a while - and being thankful that Luna was not in the area - Chibi-Usa remembered what Hotaru had said earlier.

><br> "You told me before that it could be really dangerous if someone opened the staff. Did you mean Takuhi would get hurt by the wards? Or attacked by a cat or something?"

><br> Hotaru jumped during that last sentence for some reason, probably just worried about Takuhi, then she started laughing.

><br> "No, I was more worried about what would happen if Takuhi came out and I wasn't here. Err, Takuhi's a bit protective of me, you know. If I'm not around, he's liable to come out full sized and go looking for me."

><br> Rei turned an eye towards her. "Just how big is 'full sized'?"

><br> Hotaru blushed and looked down. "About... thirty meters wing span."

><br> Everyone went quite at that. The image of a thirty meter bird terrorising downtown Tokyo, searching for a little girl was a little too much to digest immediately.

><br> While the girls considered the implications of big-bird (and I don't mean the tall, yellow and stupid variety), Mamoru soaked in a hot bath, trying to ease the pain which covered every inch of his body. At the same time, Setsuna was delivering her information on Sailor Saturn. Not far away, a wizened old woman struck her apprentice on the head with her cane and said the words. 'How could you let your husband escape, Shampoo?'

><br> Shampoo was bopped on her head with the gnarled wooden cane. Exactly how this was managed is a good question. Shampoo stood on the

high side of five foot. Her Mistress stood an imposing two foot nothing. The staff was only around two foot also... Once again, physics took a back seat to the application of violence. "How could you let your husband escape, Shampoo?"

><br> <"Great Grandmother, he beat me in the challenge! I could hardly just drag him off, could I?">

><br> Bop! "Speak Japanese! You need the practice."

><br> "Yes, Great Grandmother. Husband beat Shampoo in fight. Shampoo no can just take husband."

><br> "Better." Bop! As Shampoo rubbed her sore head, she looked at her mentor seeking an answer to this hit.

><br> "Don't be so impertinent next time. Now, tell me of this fight. How is it that a mere boy managed to defeat the best Amazon warrior of her generation?"

><br> "Shampoo sorry. Shampoo not good enough. Perhaps if Great Grandmother teach new special attack..."

><br> "Of course you are good enough. I'm beginning to suspect that you are getting sloppy deliberately. I've watched some of your recent fights. Three times I watched and you did not employ the Roasting Chestnuts Over An Open Fire. Three times I watched you prolong a difficult fight. Admit to me that this is what happened today. You lost because of your overconfidence."

><br> "Shampoo use. Husband use too. Husband much faster. Husband block me and punch at same time... Shampoo defeated fairly." She hung her head. Defeat was nothing to take lightly.

><br> That news caused the crone to being pacing back and forwards in their small room. It was a most disturbing sight watching a withered old woman bouncing on a solid stick. Not only that, but despite the fact that her long pale grey hair reached floor level (while she was on the stick), she managed to avoid ever landing on her hair. The first few times she had ever tried to bounce while the stick rested on her hair were enough to teach her quickly.

><br> "So you say that son-in-law knows the Chestnut Fist? Interesting. Most interesting. There should be no-one outside of our tribe that knows our secret attacks. It is actually good that he defeated you. This way his marriage will bring his strength into the tribe, and we will be able to prevent the spread of the knowledge."

><br> "What we do if husband no marry Shampoo?"

><br> "We will have to kill him. But do not fear, there is no reason why he will not marry you. You are strong, a great fighter, and beautiful. The boy will be made to see sense."

><br> The two women set about packing their belongings. Shampoo had two locations which they could watch for the arrival of her husband. Soon enough he would either arrive at the dojo where he was first seen, or he would again go through the area that Shampoo lost him. With the pair of them staking out the locations, he was certain to be seen.

><br> They were heading out of the small hotel room when Shampoo stopped and remembered something. Something worth mentioning even: "Great Grandmother... Husband know Amazon Law. Husband even have Book Of Amazon Law."

><br> That was a surprise. "Very strange. I spoke with the Council of Elders before we left the village. There have only been three cast outs from the village in the last forty years, and all of them were women. Naturally, none of them kept their Book Of Law. Very interesting."

><br> As they walked to their destination they both pondered the situation. A male that knew Amazon secret moves, that knew Amazon Law, and had Book Of Law? Any male that knew their laws would be well aware that he should not be alone outside the village unless escorted by a woman. For that matter, anyone possessing a Book Of Law would realise the dangers of using the Chestnut Fist against an Amazon.

><br> Amazons had a firm but fair justice system. It was also a justice system that considered the death penalty to be a mid-range punishment. Amazons could be very creative.

><br>  
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>End Of Chapter <p>

## 16. A Time For Action...

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><br>This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.



><br>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

><br>This story is dedicated to the letters N and T and the number 6/10.

><br>  
>Visit my website at<br>  
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>http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire

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><br> / \  
><br> | Destiny's Child |  
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><br>  
><br>What has gone before:  
><br>While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages. Having finally returned to Japan after 400 years of travel and experience, Ranma is trying to make a new life.

><br>Ranma's (or Tomoe Hotaru as his girl half is known) does not seem capable of having a normal life. He is learning Shinto from Hino Rei, pursued by the boy starved girls of the Sailor Senshi and simply pursued by the enraged demon-pig Ryoga. Just when he was worrying that there were no good martial artists in Tokyo, a certain Amazon arrives claiming the same thing. Well, one thing led to another and can you say "Amazon Law"?

><br>The Outers are plotting, the Inners are confused, and every woman, man and beast on the planet seems to be after Ranma for one reason or another. But Shampoo's great grandmother has a plan to make Ranma theirs...

><br>-----  
><br>A Time For Action...  
><br>-----

><br> If Wednesday was a time for talking, then Thursday was the calm before the storm. Friday was the day of action. Unknown to the participants, it was to be a day of pivotal importance. A day when cultures would collide, and issues once thought settled would be torn open like a new wound.

><br> It all started so innocently. Ranma had come to the Hikawa shrine that afternoon for a quick lesson. Rei-san was expecting to go out with some of her friends, so he would only be visiting for a short while. When he walked through the entrance, he was surprised to see Rei walking towards him, holding something to her chest.

><br> As they walked together to the room where they would be studying, he looked over her burden and was studied in return. Nestled in her arms, snuggled against her breasts was a small black piglet. It big, soulful eyes, a yellow and black bandanna, and looked enormously contented and snug. Staring at it intently, he could have sworn that it was Ryoga's cursed form. But Ryoga hated that form, so there was no way that he would voluntarily use it like this. Not only that, but the shrine's wards should cause him all manner of pain. Not to say the least, Ranma (and Rei) should have felt his demonic influence easily.

><br> Rei noticed Ranma's rapt attention, and held up the little pig so he could see better. "I found him wandering around earlier today. Isn't he just unbelievably cute?"

><br> Rei gave a smile so happy and warm, it could have heated a football stadium. Ranma's heart thudded in his chest. For an angry, uptight, aggressive, uncute, tomboy like her, she really was very beautiful. After a moment, Ranma shook his mind free of the thoughts in it. It was disgusting. She must have been fifteen, he was over four hundred. More importantly, he was married. How could he be thinking these unfaithful thoughts about Rei-san?

><br> Yes! Yes, he would not be unfaithful to his beloved wife. Rei-san was not an uncute tomboy. She was just a beautiful girl. That was all. Just plain old beautiful. Nothing uncute about her at all.

><br> Ranma noticed that in his concentration he had stopped walking, and was still starrng at where the pig had been. Only Rei-san had lifted the pig up to give it a kiss. Which meant he had been staring intently at her breasts for several seconds. Slowly he lifted his eyes and, with his face burning in shame, looked in her face. Her very angry face.

><br> "Ranma you pervert!"

><br> The words were like music to his ears. He had first heard those words the day he met his wife. But somehow, the sheer pleasure of hearing those words was torture in his soul. They were words never again to be uttered by Akane, and that hurt more than the insult could possibly have intended. He looked at the ground and studied his feet for a moment before he could find his voice again.

><br> "S-Sorry, Rei-san. I... I just thought I recognised the pig. It looks a lot like Hotaru's pet pig, Ryoga."

><br> Ranma bent down and studied the pig at close range when she held it out to him. Looking into it's eyes, he pointed his finger at it and asked. "Is that you in there, Ryoga?"

><br> Chomp! "Judging by the way that he gnawing on my finger, I'd say that it is Ryoga."

><br> He barely heard Rei's offer to let him take the pig home, because while he was touching the pig, he was straining to sense the demon inside. Finally he found it, and was amazed at how well the demonic powers were hidden. Being in his piglet form seemed to have stripped Ryoga of almost all of his powers. Since Ryoga was also consciously hiding his heritage as much as possible, it was no wonder neither Rei nor the wards had been able to see the evil influence that permeated his being. The only reason Ranma could see it was he knew exactly what to look for.

><br> The lesson was a fairly short one. Shorter still since the pig got more attention than Ranma did. Rei spent most of the time hugging the little porker to her, and cooing with little baby noises. As time went by, Ranma became more and more aggrieved, watching how the demon was taking advantage of his form.

><br> As Ranma was leaving, one of Rei's friends walked in the gate. It was the girl with the short black hair he had met the other night. Whereas most people would not deny Rei qualified as beautiful, this girl more ranked as 'cute'. She was nice, but nothing to write home about, really. She seemed a fairly quite girl, and if he could remember her name, he might be able to say hello and brighten her day.

><br> Just as the newcomer was captivated by the little pig in his hands, he remembered. "Hello, Ami-chan. Rei-san was just telling me you were going out tonight. I hope you have a good time."

><br> Ami blushed under the scrutiny of the good looking man. It was sad in so many ways, really. She could not even remember being introduced to him, but he was immediately calling her 'Ami-chan', and acting friendly. Even after knowing Rei for a few months, he still called her 'Rei-san'. She knew that distant formality hurt Rei, it was easy enough for the Senshi to see how she felt about the man that she was teaching.

><br> In the day following every training session with Ranma, Rei would tell her friends about what they had done. Ranma was always a perfect gentlemen. He was smart, a good student, and so wise and powerful in other ways. Not only that, but he refused to act in the same way that every other boy in school seemed to. While some of the boys thought Rei was an 'Ice Queen', cold and distant, most of them showed how their brains were suffering from hormone overload. Ranma never acted like that.

><br> Ami noticed the way that Rei had flinched slightly when Ranma spoke to her. So forward with her, but so withdrawn from Rei. To hear her talk, he could be joking, friendly and comfortable one minute, and seconds later he would withdraw, seeming to hold a certain distance between the two of them.

><br> Waving goodbye to Ranma and his pig, she watched the two of them wander down the road that joined the shrine. Looking at her friend, she wondered whether Rei had summoned the courage to ask Ranma to join them when the girls went to dinner. Looking at the dejected expression, she guessed she had not.

><br> Ranma did not carry the pig for too long before he stepped into a cafe and bought some tea. Taking the disposable cup with him, he headed into a small alley between some houses and dropped the pig on the ground. Ryoga looked up at him with those big, mournful, piggy eyes of his, and Ranma forced himself to remember that this form was just an aberration. Normally Ryoga would change into a giant rampaging wild boar, almost a ton of muscle, hooves and tusks.

><br> A splash of tea, and Ryoga was human in appearance once more. Snarling at Ranma, he summoned clothes and attired himself in his normal travelling wear. After a while, the two men stood there in the alley. Nose to nose, and both tense with emotions only just held in check, the stalemate held for numerous seconds. Finally Ranma spoke.

><br> "So, Ryoga. Mind telling me what you were up to?"

><br> Ryoga leaned back against the wall and looked away. His posture was deliberately insulting. Almost as insulting as the tone he used. "I really don't see how it's any of your problem Ranma. You made me like this, so I'm just keeping myself entertained."

><br> Stepping in front of the demon boy, Ranma clenched his fists in anger. "Seeing as you're here to bother me, and she's a friend of mine, then 'yes', it is my problem. What are you up to?"

><br> "Hey, I'm a demon. Use your imagination."

><br> "You're not a demon at the moment, Ryoga. Try acting like a man for a change."

><br> Ryoga grabbed fistfuls of Ranma's shirt and lifted him off the ground. "It's your fault that I'm not a demon at the moment. I said I'm going to destroy your happiness, and I mean it. Besides, I don't want to go without food forever."

><br> Ranma freed himself and stood his ground in the face of the

bigger boy's anger. "Huh? Food? What food?"

><br> "Oh, come on, Ranma. You know what demons eat. Souls. Preferably the souls and bodies of ripe young virgins. You're toy still is one you know. I can smell it. Her friends too. I can just see myself corrupting their souls."

><br> "Idiot. She lives in a temple. With that many wards you'd fry before you ate any of her soul."

><br> "Oh, but a little piggy can just walk around at night. And those wards aren't too hard to damage. A little bite, a little tear, and hey presto. No more ward."

><br> "You know, I almost started to possess her last night. All alone. Just her and I. You know, she took her precious pet P-Chan to bed last night. There was I crawling all over ---"

><br> He was cut off mid-sentence as Ranma's temper went ballistic. In the space of three words, Ranma lost his control and gave into his anger. Burning like a magnesium flare, his aura surrounded him. It flickered slightly as he brought his hands together and screamed "MOKO TAKABISHA!"

><br> Weak compared to what he could have done, the focused beam of Ki burned it's way straight into Ryoga's sternum, through his spine, then through seven brick walls behind him. Still wearing an expression that was caught changing between gloating and surprise, Ryoga toppled over lifelessly.

><br> 'Hmm. For such a strong demon, he really wasn't that powerful.' Ranma bent down and pressed his fingers to the side of the demon's neck, searching for a pulse. There was none.

><br> Standing up to leave the scene of the crime, Ranma was taken completely off guard when a grip of iron caught his neck. Scrabbling at the fingers ineffectually, Ranma began to turn blue as he watched Ryoga stand. Ryoga rose to his feet, and held his struggling victim a foot off the ground.

><br> "Demons don't have a pulse. Did you honestly think a little hole like that would slow me down? Me? A full demon?"

><br> Mentally, Ranma cursed himself. It had been over a century since he had first summoned Ryoga. Of course someone like him had grown more powerful. Even as he watched, the hole in Ryoga's chest filled with flesh and bone, sealing over. In under ten seconds he may never have been injured at all.

><br> Laughing with glee (and a generous touch of megalomania), Ryoga threw the smaller man down the alley, and through the chain link fence that ended it. As garbage flew everywhere, Ryoga began to advance on Ranma. He would make this slow and painful. Initially he had wanted to make Ranma suffer as he had suffered. Now the anger was upon him. Rational thought fled his brain, and only the bloodlust mattered now.

><br> Kicking boxes aside, Ryoga searched for his prey. As soon as he was close enough, Ranma threw off his cover and delivered a pair of powerful kicks to the demon's midsection. Punches followed, then a throw that packed enough force to crater the wall behind him.

><br> Demons and humans fundamentally used the same source of magic. And that source - or more precisely: a person's ability to drain that source - was definitely limited. Every time Ryoga healed himself, he drained his magic. When Ryoga used up all his magic, he would no longer be able to heal. When he could no longer heal, he could be killed. Fine in theory, but a demon of Ryoga's calibre had a hell of a lot of magic, and healing took very little of it.

><br> Even as this bare skeleton of a plan flashed through his brain, Ranma was up and moving. Scaling the sheer brick side of the building, he dodged the first two fireballs that Ryoga sent, then deflected the third off his magical shield.

><br> Moving in to close quarters, Ranma's aura began to shrink as he pulled in the power, focusing it, and using it for productive means. His senses sharpened, his speed increased, and his strength multiplied beyond any credible limit. For a short time - say a minute or two - Ranma was entirely capable of slugging it out with pig-boy at close quarters. So he did.

><br> At the end of two minutes their alley had widened to the size of a city block because of the collateral damage they were doing. Missed blows shattered brick and concrete, while a successful hit would send the recipient through a wall. Dimly, at the edge of his senses, Ranma could feel the people running from their battle. Any normal person that was caught in their next stage would be crisped like yesterdays toast.

><br> By the end of two minutes, Ranma had accomplished very little against Ryoga, but he had achieved the effect that he desired. In order to prevent himself being reduced to a messy puddle by the enhanced Ranma, Ryoga had been forced to call on his own inner powers. Now Ryoga revealed his heritage for all to see.

><br> Unable to convert to his most powerful battle form - the raging wild boar - Ryoga was now only one step away from unleashing his own private hell on earth. His fangs had grown to the point where they could no longer be fully contained in his mouth, and the massive fangs protruded out where they could do the most damage if he manage to bite someone. His skin, once smooth like any man's, was now

covered in short, coarse, dark hairs. His skin was halfway between it's normal pink and the black of his pig form. While his hands and feet had not reached the cloven form of a pig's trotters, they were hardened and reinforced with extra bone and cartilage.

><br> As Ranma withdrew breathing heavily, he eyed his opponent. Ranma's attack had weakened himself severely, but it had hardly phased his enemy. Before they started fighting, Ranma wondered if he would have been able to defeat Ryoga. It would have been close, too close. Now that he had wasted so much of his Ki on an ineffectual attack, there was no way that he would be able to outlast Ryoga in the extended battle that this was sure to become.

><br> But now Ryoga looked like the demon he was. And the stench of demon would fill the air for miles, even more so when they began to hurl some serious magic. One thing he had learned from watching the news was that where there were demons, there were demon killers. With the amount of damage he was sure they were going to do, those girls in skirts would be here in a flash.

><br> Fighting demons was not about fighting fair. It was about fighting to win, and winning was what Anything Goes specialised in. If winning meant roping in professional demon killers, he had no objection to that.

><br> All this thinking had taken too long, however. While Ranma was still gathering himself, Ryoga was recharged and ready for more. Launching a series of fireballs, he began to track the running Ranma, each one closer than the last.

><br> Eventually Ranma was hit, and the magical energies impacted on his shield, throwing the boy backwards into the wall of flames created by eight missed attacks. Although the magical strike failed to hurt him (only depleting his own reserves further), the perfectly natural flames on the ground eagerly attacked his shirt when he landed on a flaming support beam.

><br> Although he had started the day in one his favourite outfits - black silk pants and a red silk Chinese shirt - he had to quickly doff his shirt. Running along half naked, Ranma looked for more clothes. Luck was with him, since Ryoga decided to change from the energy inefficient fireballs to the more focused Digger Bolt. A Digger Bolt would basically cause a small explosion at the point of contact for the spell. It was nowhere near as good for an area effect weapon, but against a single target like Ranma, it could be fired with abandon.

><br> Changing course, Ranma jumped and leaped, avoiding several strikes. Two of those that missed opened up a house, and he saw his chance. Racing through what had once been a bedroom, he grabbed the first pieces of clothing he came to. Looking down into his hands, he grunted his disapproval. He needed the clothes in case he changed into a girl, and having two layers was useful against fire attacks,

but was a white shirt and formal jacket really what he needed?

><br> After dressing himself while on the run, it was time to take the fight back to Ryoga. Launching a pair of his own fireballs, he bracketed his foe. While Ryoga was locked in position with the flames, Ranma dropped to one knee and fired another Moko Takabisha. He was low on Ki, but spiritual attacks could be harder to deflect than mere magic.

><br> Luck was with him, and the blast went exactly where he wanted. Shattering one knee, he briefly gained the manoeuvring advantage. Circling his opponent, Ranma almost cried out in dismay, Exchanging Digger Bolts shot for shot, Ryoga regained his feet, and regrew the damaged knee.

><br> Both warriors were beginning to tire now. They were surrounded by shattered buildings, flame, and a modern vision of hell. Still they fought on, because the first one to try to retreat would be hunted down and killed in his weakness. To lose was to die. Ranma circled him again, throwing magic.

><br> Suddenly Ryoga fell to one knee. Looking closely, Ranma could see the blazing pyre that engulfed half his body. Both fighters hesitated briefly and looked at the source of the new attack. Perhaps, this was the help Ranma had been hoping for.

><br> Before he could see anyone, he heard the words "MERCURY BUBBLE BLAST!" and the world was shrouded in impenetrable white fog. Damn! They must be short of some of the team members and need time for the others to arrive. Don't they realise that he's at his weakest now? If they give him time, he'll just recover again!

><br> Deciding that he needed to watch this fight in action, Ranma looked around. Several of the houses were still standing in the immediate vicinity. Dashing into one, he looked around for a disguise. The last thing he needed was for every demon hunter in the city to be looking for a certain Tendo Ranma. In the first house he visited he found exactly what he needed.

><br> A black silk scarf with holes for eyes wrapped around his head. It was much the same way that his father used to wear it, but this style would cover his hair and eyes, giving him the anonymity that he needed. Grabbing a pitch black cloak on impulse he leaped to the top of a brick chimney and looked down on the thinning fog. Good. In moments the fight would be rejoined.

><br> Sailor Mercury was the first to see the demon as the fog thinned. It was different from most of the ones she had fought in recent times. For one thing, it was an out and out demon: risen from the very pits of hell. Most of their recent opponents had been Daimons, a strange fusion of animate evil with inanimate objects.



><br> Looking closely at the demon, she wondered exactly what sort it was. To all appearances it was a cross breed, a half man - half demon thing. All the other true demons she had known had the ability to convert to some true monstrous form. The forms they chose seemed to largely be composed of things with too many tentacles, too many teeth, too many mouths, and lots of dripping slime. This guy had the tooth size down pat, but the rest of him could almost pass for some hideously deformed man. Almost. If it was not for the aura of pure, distilled evil that fell from every pore of his skin, she may have been fooled.

><br> Now that the fog had thinned, the demon regained it's feet from where it had been kneeling. It looked around and spotted the two pretty soldiers.

><br> Then it smiled.

><br> Sailor Mars had not concentrated on the demon initially because she was searching for it's enemy. Whatever it had been fighting, it was not a Senshi, and anything else capable of doing this much damage was worthy of grave consideration. After she looked for a while she could spot no-one aside from Tuxedo Kamen, mounting his vigil from on high.

><br> Hmm, that's odd. He's not wearing his usual mask and top hat. Must be in the wash today... For that matter, he usually doesn't show himself until Sailor Moon is in trouble.

><br> She had almost reached the conclusion that this was not Tuxedo Kamen when the demon started to move. Whoever was on the chimney could wait: they presented nowhere near the threat of an angry demon. Flashing a glance at her comrade in arms, they leapt in unison.

><br> At the peak of their arcs, both pretty soldiers sent their attacks streaming in. On one side, the demon was caught in the freezing blast of water, and on the other it was roasted alive with the cleansing fire of Mars' attack.

><br> Each of them landed and struck a triumphant pose. The demon's skin was charred and blackened; looking and smelling like it was the guest of honour for pig-on-a-spit. Moments after they landed, their confidence began to waver as the blackened skin simply fell off, revealing healthy skin underneath. The demon smiled most unnervingly and pulled a bandanna off it's head.

><br> Watching carefully, Sailor Mercury was astounded to see that the demon was actually pulling several bandannas off. By the time it had six in it's hand, both Sailor's were quite nonplussed. Things became even stranger when the demon began to swing them around and throw them at the Senshi. Each of the girls took off in a different direction, circling the demon, trying to reduce the number of projectiles he could target on either one.

><br> Their plan almost worked. They both managed to evade the bulk of the razor edged bandannas, but were caught by one or two each. Sailor Mars took a small cut to her upper arm, but both girls had their skirts ripped by the weapons. Normally this would have resulted in large expanses of firm legs being exposed indecently to the public, but the Senshi's clothes were designed with this in mind: their skirts were already so short, that even a massive tear hardly showed anything new.

><br> The torn skirts did have a profound psychological effect however. An age of combat against Ranma, followed by the magic blasts by the Senshi had failed to do any permanent harm to Ryoga. At the thought of lovely bodies - with their scant clothing torn in strategically positioned ways - Ryoga's face went bright red, and a stream of blood began to pour from his nose.

><br> High up on the chimney, Ranma shook his head in sorrow at the pathetic sight ahead of him. How Ryoga ever expected to be a demon and devour virgins he never knew. The fool would collapse from blood loss before he did anything.

><br> Ranma watched the girls and studied their style as they carried the fight to the demon. They were fast and strong, that much was obvious. They also seemed to place a greater emphasis on strength over skill. He knew that if he wielded the level of power that they did, he was confident that he could do better. Then again, whenever he really cut loose, there tended to be a loss of accuracy. He could not really fault their style, since even though there was only two of them, they were fighting an even battle against Ryoga. It was only recently Ranma realised just how much of a challenge that would be.

><br> Looking carefully at the girls, he tried to memorise their faces, so that he would recognise them next time. As he studied them, he realised that there was a glamour field surrounding each of them. A glamour was a spell which confused the viewer. When he looked at them, he might see a face, but it would not be their real face, even cameras would be fooled. The only way to break a glamour this powerful would be to watch it being cast; even a moments distraction at a critical time and he would not be able to see them. He would just have to hope of catching these girls some time when they were powering-up.

><br> While the two girls changed tactics and tried to attack Ryoga physically - each one coming in from a different side - he tried studying them in another manner. He was already impressed with their beauty, especially that of girl with the long black hair and short red skirt. The only thing that upset him was that anyone that beautiful must surely be the result of the glamour spell they were using. This girl was even better looking than Rei-san, and that was certainly saying something. Concentrating, he shifted his vision and tried to look at their spirits, the manifestation of their Ki.

><br> Although the glamour prevented him from positively identifying

them in this manner, he could still see their overriding emotions. Both of them showed fear, worry and confusion; what else could you expect when you were fighting something the power of Ryoga? What startled him and drew him like a moth to the flame was the emotions of the girl in the red skirt again. Truly, she was even more beautiful spiritually than physically. She fairly boiled over with anger, aggression, and a fierce will. He had not seen anyone quite like that since he married Akane!

><br> Suddenly a spike of pain surged through her aura, and he realised just how close hers was to Ryoga's. Shifting back to mundane vision, he was horrified to see the girl was behind held by the throat by one of Ryoga's powerful hands. Fortunately his other hand was being kept busy throwing small fireballs at the girl in the blue uniform, but that situation could not last. As soon as he realised that he could ignore one for a while, the Girl Guides would be looking for a new member.

><br> His time watching had allowed him to rest for a while, so he gathered his Ki for another exhausting attack. Even as the girl was turning a similar shade, a large blue ball formed in his hands and he fired it out to the call of "MOKO TAKABISHA!"

><br> The blast burned straight through Ryoga's fore-arm. There was no way it could be a lethal wound, but it would buy the girl the time she needed. When she sprawled at Ryoga's feet - luxurious black hair everywhere, and magnificent chest heaving in a most disturbing manner as she sucked in deep breaths - he realised he needed to distract Ryoga long enough for her to escape.

><br> "Pretty soldier, hear my words. Never fear the darkness of evil, for you are the light that shines in the dark. Yours is the strength of a pure heart, and you shall have the strength of ten men - ten BIG men - because of it."

><br> He felt like an idiot spouting poetic garbage like that, but it worked. The girl got to her feet while Ryoga was building for a magic attack against him. As soon as she started to run, the other warrior for love, justice and tight clothing cast her Mercury Bubble Blast again. Ranma groaned in resignation as the battlefield was covered in a fog so thick and impenetrable that he could no longer see anyone.

><br> A bright flash in the clouds showed the path of Ryoga's fireball, but it blew up against a building in the distance. After this much fighting, and with three opponents still up and playing, Ryoga could not afford to cast spells wildly in the hope of getting a hit.

><br> Within the fog, Ryoga looked around, desperately seeking his foes. He almost had one! He could feel her pulse weakening as he squeezed. He had almost killed one of the dreaded Sailor Senshi! Everyone in hell would celebrate if he returned with the news of that

victory. Few demons bore them personal grudges but no one actually liked them; too many of their friends had failed to return over the years. There was a lot of bad blood between the demons and the Senshi.

><br> Hearing faint foot steps off to one side, he started to run at them. Turning to keep track of them, he ran smack into a wall. The concrete shattered easily when subject to his strength, but he could still not find them. As he held still for a moment, he listened. 'There! To the left! Voices, it sounds like a whole crowd!' He ran at them again, but once more they eluded him. This time he found a set of chain link fencing blocking off a drainage ditch.

><br> Cursing his luck, he turned to the right and tried to run parallel to the drainage ditch. With his rotten curse, he could hardly risk falling into the ditch and turning into a harmless piglet. His vision was still clouded when he noticed the bitumen had changed in the soft loam of a forest. Moments later he ran face first into a sturdy tree.

><br> Lost again? "Damn you, Tendo Ranma! I shall make you pay for this!"

><br> The forest just echoed.

><br> Back in Tokyo, Japan, Sailor Mercury was trying to track the demon using her computer. She normally cast the fog so that the Senshi could get some breathing space. Their enemies were unable to see through it, and it let them gather themselves for a few moments. After being half strangled, Sailor Mars had needed that time - this was even more true since Sailor Moon had just called saying that the remainder of the girls would be with them in one more minute.

><br> Now the demon had managed to do something she had never heard of before. Without the slightest trace of magical power, the demon seemed to have teleported across half of Tokyo. Even as she watched, the computer tracked the demon as it teleported again. The fourth time he did it, the computer lost every trace.

><br> "My God! This thing is incredible! If it had tried teleporting during the fight, it would have had us for breakfast! But why did it run away now? Did it know that Sailor Moon was coming? And who was that hunk on the building?"

><br> Realising that she was speaking out loud and no-one was likely to answer her questions, Sailor Mercury went to help her friend. As soon as she reassured her that the demon was gone, Sailor Mars collapsed to the ground and began to massage her sore throat.

><br> When the fog cleared and the other Senshi gathered around, they discussed the best way to fight the demon, and tried to think of what

they knew. The facts were few and far between.

><br> A demon - name unknown, type unknown, powers unknown and summoner unknown - had been fighting an unknown enemy, for an unknown period, for reasons unknown. When they arrived, the unknown demon turned on them for more unknown reasons, and the unknown adversary had failed to be seen. They had spotted an unknown observer with unknown powers and unknown motivations. Said observer had also assisted the Senshi for more unknown reasons. Last - but not least - both the observer and the demon used means unknown to vanish to places unknown.

><br> All in all, there were just a few too many unknowns here. The only bright spot was that while the demon was powerful, he was certainly within the ability of the Senshi to deal with. They all knew that they would have a major battle, but if they had the whole team, they were confident of success.

><br> While the girls milled around, Ranma had wandered off. As soon as the fog had fallen, he realised that Ryoga would get lost. He had no idea how it was possible, but the boy could get lost walking down a one way tunnel. By now he could be almost anywhere. Briefly he considered dropping by and speaking to the girls, but if they had glamour spells on, there was not much point. Besides, he had no real interest in being identified by the vigilante demon hunters, even if they were pretty soldiers.

><br> Ranma had had a bad end to the week, and he was sure that the weekend could not get much worse. He was almost right, it could not get much worse, but it could easily stay at the same high level on the 'Sucks-to-be-you' scale.

><br> Saturday was school in the morning. That was awful. After that, every attempt he made to stay a guy was foiled. That really irked him. In the evening, his 'father' and Mistress 9 needed him to use some special treatments to prepare his body. They were painful, tasted bad and smelled worse.

><br> Sunday he woke up late after an all night session in the lab with Souichi. That meant he missed his usually early morning training session. Not only that, but the workings in the lab had drained him dangerously low on both magic and Ki. Under Mistress 9's guidance, he had cast some of the spells that she needed, and he could feel the changes continuing apace.

><br> Eventually, he set off, needing to work some of the frustration out of his system. He was four steps out of the door when he realised that today was a day he had agreed to teach a children's course at the dojo he had visited last week. He struggled to decide whether he was happy to be teaching again (especially kids, he always liked teaching them) or whether he should be mad since he would not be able to train again till Monday morning.

><br> Even something as simple as crossing a small section of city could turn into a nightmare for a Jusenkyo cursed victim. As a plaything to the Kami, he was dodging cold water at every turn. The detours he needed to take lead him many blocks off his course, and into one of the more affluent sections of town.

><br> He was just starting to turn back in the direction of the dojo when something caught his eye. He looked around again, searching the crowd for what he had subconsciously picked up on. There it was again. Green. Green. Ah! Green hair!

><br> Not that green hair was uncommon. He had seen lots of people with green hair. Few of them had green hair like this girl. She was tall, elegant, and walked with a refined manner. The main thing that set him off was the fact that he recognised her face. It was Miko, or Mina, or Miyabi, well, it was Mi-something, and her name did not matter. What mattered was that she was the girlfriend of the tall boy with the Nyanniichuan curse.

><br> Just thinking about him must have summoned him, because the next thing he knew, the tall blonde boy was walking out of a store and linking arms with the girl. Nice looking couple those two. The boy was a bit too pretty for what Ranma considered a 'real man', but lots of the girls seemed to like that pretty-boy, idol singer look these days.

><br> Ranma checked his watch. He could watch the couple for ten minutes, then hurry and still make the class. Hmm, it was worth it. He wanted to get there early, but if there was the opportunity to find out where another Jusenkyo victim was living, there was no way he was going to pass it up.

><br> After watching for twelve minutes (cursing constantly as the seconds ticked by) he was ready to leave. The pair had been walking quietly through the nice looking streets, obviously enjoying a morning together. He had concluded that they must like looking at expensive houses when they turned and entered one of them. These guys must be loaded!

><br> Turning his back and running to the dojo, Ranma's mind was whirling with the implications. He had an address. A little bit of elementary detective work and he would have names to attach to those faces. Ho, ho, ho! Now it didn't matter that the witch with the dark green hair had prevented him speaking to them at the concert. Soon. Soon he would find them, and then he could start to take some more steps to fixing his curse. He trusted Mistress 9, she had kept her part of the bargain well so far: he just liked to pursue every avenue that opened.

><br> Ranma arrived at the dojo with only a minute or two to spare. Already most of the kids were there, and there were a fair few parents sitting around the outside of the dojo. Bowing to the elderly

sensei, he hurriedly changed into a Gi and joined him at the front of the class.

><br> "Sorry about being late, Sensei. Some personal business came up, and it took me a while to be able to postpone it."

><br> The old man smiled. He had been worried that the talented young fighter had no intention of showing up and helping with the class. The fact that he remembered his commitments was a good sign.

><br> "Don't worry, lad. The main thing is that you are here now."

><br> The class bowed in, and the two Sensei led them through a series of warm ups. Most of the kids were between seven and ten, so their attention span was short. Keeping the exercises to a simple and easy level, Ranma and the old master gave them a bit of exercise.

><br> While the children may have had short attention spans, the mothers watching did not. When he had first arrived, they expected that the handsome young man must have been a father of one of the students. Now that he was training them - and since he was not wearing a wedding ring - it was a different matter. In front of their eyes, this firm, healthy, HANDSOME, perfect specimen of manhood was moving with the grace of a dancer. Dozens of eyes watched and mentally undressed him.

><br> Ranma did not notice any of the parents, they were not his concern, and they were obviously no danger. What was his concern was seeing these children properly trained. Trained so that they would have the interest in coming back in the future, and trained so that they would do their school proud. A lifetime spent running the Tendo dojo, three decades of teaching Amazon students, and centuries studying under some of the best (and worst) teachers in the world had taught Ranma lots of tricks of the trade.

><br> He was on his knees teaching a trio of little girls the fundamentals of punching when a movement caught his eye. Even as he continued teaching, he split his attention and focused on the commotion at the entrance to the dojo.

><br> Shampoo was currently struggling with her great-grandmother, attempting to get past her cane. After a few fruitless tries, she gave up at glared down at the shrunken old woman.

><br> "Why you stop Shampoo? Shampoo see groom: Shampoo go get groom."

><br> Bonk! "Show some respect, Great-Granddaughter. Son-in-law is teaching. To be a great fighter is one thing, to have the skill to teach is another. You have indeed found a most suitable husband,

Shampoo."

><br> As the two of them sat at the entrance and watched, the old crone continued to lecture her student and protégé. "Handsome, strong, smart: son-in-law will be an ideal match for you. Ha! Look at that! That little girl would make a fine Amazon!"

><br> Noticing that the guests understood the importance of teaching children, Ranma again devoted his full, attention to the class. Time passed quickly, too quickly for his tastes. In no time, the class was winding to a close, and the sensei were up the front, bowing and saying goodbye to their students.

><br> More than one single mother was in the audience, and started towards the handsome new teacher. None of them could match the sheer speed and enthusiasm of an elite Amazon warrior when confronted with her ideal mate. In less time than it took to blink, Shampoo had moved from the back of the hall, past all the mothers gathering children, to an 'affectionate' position on Ranma.

><br> Considering the length of her dress, and the way she moulded herself to him, Shampoo and Ranma could almost get arrested for that sort of behaviour if she had done it in a public place. An audible sigh of disappointment went around the room. Of course someone so handsome would have a girlfriend. Actually, judging by the way that she was holding him and trying to suck his tonsils out, perhaps she was more than just his girlfriend. Sighing again, the mothers gathered their children and tried to avoid looking at them. There was no way any of them could compete with such a young, healthy and amazingly cute girl.

><br> Finally Ranma managed to free himself slightly when Shampoo came up for air. "Shampoo! Cut that out! I'm married!"

><br> Shampoo released him and backed away as though he had just grown an extra head. "You have wife? Aiyaa! Why you no tell Shampoo you have wife?"

><br> Glad that she was off him, Ranma kept backing away. In all honesty, it really felt very nice when she was all over him. The big problem with it was that she was bringing up desires that he had been repressing for a long time. A very, very long time. Three hundred years without sex is enough to make anyone feel a little tense the first time you get a bundle of fun like Shampoo climbing all over you. Fortunately, twelve year old girls tend to have very little sex drive. Ranma really wanted a cold shower, right about now.

><br> "Well... Actually, she died a while ago. But I still love her."

><br> Shampoo smiled happily and tried to resume her former position.



"Wo da airen! If Ranma wife dead, Shampoo wife now. Come back to village. Shampoo make you forget wife."

><br> Ranma dodged her oncoming hug and flushed red in anger. "I've told you twice already, Shampoo! Your marriage challenge did not apply to me since I'm an Amazon, and you did not declare your intention first."

><br> The purple haired beauty pointed at the two foot tall withered old crone. "Great-Grandmother! You tell husband. He no Amazon. He Shampoo husband!"

><br> Nodding sagely from her perch on the stick, the woman croaked. "Shampoo is right, Son-in-law. I know all of the strongest warriors in the village, and you are not one of them. Since I do not know you, you are obviously not an Amazon."

><br> "Feh! I don't care who you are Granny. Even if your the Matriarch herself, you couldn't cast me out. I was an Amazon. I am an Amazon. I will be an Amazon."

><br> "Son-in-law, I do not know why you persist in this fallacy, but I am the Matriarch. If you want me to, I will cast you out, and then Shampoo can fight you again. If you defeat her, she will be your bride."

><br> "Are you hard of hearing? I just said, 'even if your the Matriarch herself, you couldn't cast me out'. Only a full council of Mistresses can cast me out. I deny you the right to exile me. Now, please leave. I have to get ready to see some friends."

><br> As Shampoo stood watching them - head moving back and forth as though watching a tennis match - her mentor laughed. "Son-in-law, you just dig yourself in deeper. Even if you pretend to know our laws, you should also realise the crimes you have committed. When you fought my great-granddaughter you used the Chestnut Fist. If you were an Amazon, you should realise the penalties for a man wandering the country-side unescorted holding such information in his head. Come, marry Shampoo, return to the village with us and you will be forgiven."

><br> "Grrr, stop trying to blame me for everything! I already have permission to use and teach these techniques here. And before you ask, I was one of the Matriarchs which gave me permission."

><br> The woman burst out laughing. "Trapped by your own cleverness! Ha, Ha! I have been Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku for over one hundred years. There is no way that you are older then I, and I have never give permission to any MALE to teach anything. Come. Time is wasting. Join us and leave."

><br> Ranma just turned his back and began to pack a bag with his sweaty Gi and get changed into his normal clothes. "I really don't care what the two of you intend to do, but I'm not going with you. As far as I'm concerned, you can stay here for the rest of the day. See ya."

><br> Ranma started to walk past them, but Shampoo put out an arm to stop him. "Husband... Ranma. If you say you Amazon, then I challenge you for marriage. We fight again. You win, you marry. OK?"

><br> Silently, Shampoo cheered. There was no way to lose now. She was sure that a fighter like her husband would never turn down a challenge. Anyone with pride would take it, and then he would be hers. She did not really care if she had to throw the fight to make him win. He had already won once before, and that was good enough for her. She waited smiling while she watched his face contort in anguish. For any real Amazon, there can be one answer to a challenge.

><br> "No, I refuse."

><br> "YOU WHAT? How can you call yourself an Amazon and still turn down a challenge when it is offered?"

><br> "Hey, Granny. No one has to be forced into marriage. An Amazon has the right to refuse a marriage challenge without loss of face. Shampoo, if you want to fight, I will fight you, but I will not fight you for a marriage challenge. Besides, marriage challenges are different between Amazons. It's the winner that gets to choose if they marry. I'd win, and I'd still refuse to marry you."

><br> Shampoo cursed. Even if he was not an Amazon, he seemed to know their laws backwards and inside out. What was worse: he was right too. There was only one thing to do, go back to persuasion. If that failed, then Great-Grandmother would help her devise a new plan soon.

><br> "Why Husband no want Shampoo? Shampoo pretty. Shampoo smart. Shampoo good fighter. Shampoo better than all Japanese girl. So Shampoo better than dead wife. Shampoo prettier than everyone too. Shampoo much prettier than dead wife! Come marry Shampoo. She make you forget about dead wife."

><br> Quite simply, Ranma saw red. How dare she? How dare she say anything against his Akane? Without conscious thought, Ranma struck out, slapping her in the face, and knocking her to the ground. He then spat on the floor near her face.

><br> "You dare too much, Shampoo! I challenge you! I challenge you to a duel of honour! You who would insult my dead wife, flesh of my

flesh, joined with me, body and soul! I, her champion, defend her honour!"

><br> "Rise, coward! Rise and defend yourself against one who can fight back. Never will I accept the way you insult the honoured dead!"

><br> "Defeat me, and I am yours to command. Lose, and you shall do penance for this insult. Further, you and yours will never again slander nor act against my wife or her memory."

><br> "Rise coward! Rise and be defeated!"

><br> Shampoo cowered under the fierce gaze. This man, who seemed so handsome, had eyes filled with nothing but pain and anger. Glancing at her great-grandmother she realised she was on her own for this one. She had overstepped the bounds of decency. In Japan or China, insulting the dead like she had was perfect cause for this sort of duel.

><br> Even as she nodded to him and started to rise, another thought struck her. This was actually what she was after... almost. If she could win this fight, she would have her husband. If she lost, she would apologise, learn her lesson, and be no worse off. Standing up, she took a defensive stance and waited for him to make the first move.

><br> As soon as Shampoo acknowledged his challenge, Ranma realised that once again his mouth had gotten the better of his brain. Any other day, he would have wiped the floor with her without even breaking a sweat. Today... Today he had been without sleep, and was almost completely drained of both Ki and magic. Not only that but the horrid concoctions he had drunk last night had weakened him enormously.

><br> As he took his stance the old woman hopped between them. "Wait! We are in a public place and a dojo at that! The last thing we want is for Amazon secret techniques to become public knowledge. For the duration of this challenge, I, Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku, restrict the battle to normal means only."

><br> So subtly that neither opponent noticed, both of the combatants let out a breath of relief. Shampoo knew from the last time that she fought him, he could beat her with the Chestnut Fist. She only knew one other secret technique, so he may well have had an edge there. Ranma was equally relieved. Compared to his normal levels, his Ki was almost non-existent. Same with his magic. He hardly expected Shampoo to be proficient at spell casting so that would be a small loss, but it would mean he could save his Ki for basic defence and attack.

><br> Moving forward warily, he loosened up with a couple of punches

and a high, arcing kick to her head. Shampoo responded identically. There was no need to rush things yet. They both had time, and neither wanted to pull a muscle unnecessarily. For two minutes, they flowed back and forwards like this. A mid-pace ballet of feet and hands, neither quite trying to defeat their opponent yet... just gauging and preparing.

><br> The dojo's sensei - Ranma's friend - was watching the second fight between his partner and this purple haired dojo destroyer. He had not quiet followed everything in the conversation, but he had understood most of it. The fight itself was another matter. Already both of them were moving at speeds that he would not have been able to attain even in his prime. Both of them moved with silken grace, mixed with animal ferocity. Then it got faster and harder.

><br> Shampoo was the first to up the ante. She moved from the easy going fight to an all out assault. In an instant she was moving powerfully, nothing but strikes and kicks. Her defence dropped as she spent more and more effort on attacking, but it was worth it. She had her opponent on the ropes. No matter what he tried, he was restricted to blocking and dodging her attacks.

><br> Ranma fought to hold back a moan as a third punch got through his defences. In his condition it was like trying to fight in a pool of molasses. Every move he made sent small signals of pain trough his body, and his limbs were so slow and heavy. To make matters worse, he was so fatigued that even his brain refused to work as it should. Rather than looking six or seven moves ahead, he could only just match her. Half her blows he deflected on pure reflex, and that scared him.

><br> As Shampoo closed in again, he continued to give ground. Working on reflex was fine, it did wonderful things for your reaction speed. Even better, it allowed the mind to work on strategy, and leave the actual implementation to the body. This was all well and good if you had the right reflexes wired in. That was what scared Ranma.

><br> Ranma had spent the last four hundred years mastering the Anything Goes School of Martial Arts. While Anything Goes had plenty of punches, kicks, throws and hold which you could use to incapacitate an opponent, they were more the icing on the cake. Anything Goes specialised in just one thing: winning. Winning at the expense of the enemy. If you have the luxury of mercy, more power to you. Your first priority was to win.

><br> Winning meant killing in the final count. If someone was attacking you, they were probably trying to kill you, or beat you to the point where you could no longer defend yourself. The fastest and most effective way to stop them was to either kill them, or do them such massive damage that the could no longer fight.

><br> Ranma knew that on any other day, he could have incapacitated

Shampoo without harming a hair on her pretty head. Today... he could not. Today he was struggling to keep even. Today he was deliberately hampering his own reflexes, and consciously refusing to take almost every attack he saw. The reason was easy. If he attacked, he would almost certainly fight largely on reflex. If that happened, Shampoo's best option would be being smashed into a bloodied, crippled heap on the floor. Anything else he did would end up being even worse for her.

><br> When Shampoo swept his feet out, she forced him to do a series of rolls and back flips until he could gain the time and distance to be able to resume his stance. Finally he had endured enough. There was only one option left other than Shampoo's death, or his defeat. Releasing the tight hold he had on his Ki, he let his battle aura bloom. Freed from the massive constraints and techniques he used to hide his Ki, he would briefly have the strength and speed to defeat her without lethal or crippling force.

><br> Everyone in the dojo (other than Ranma) gasped in awe. The defender had just summoned a battle aura that was frightening in its size and intensity. A swirling blue glow surrounded his body, extending out by at least three inches. Both Amazons were stunned. They had witnessed the battle auras of some of the most powerful martial artists in their village. Even at their best, they would only just equal the magnitude of Ranma's.

><br> Ranma sighed and hoped he had enough power for what he wanted. By the looks of it, it would be a close call.

><br> The Chestnut Fist, the dreaded speed punching attack of the Joketsuzoku, relied upon using Ki to give the arms an explosive speed that could hardly be matched. Now Ranma used his Ki in a similar manner. Filling every part of his body with energy, Ranma was faster, stronger, and tougher than normal by many times.

><br> Shampoo seemed to move in slow motion as she brought her arm around for a back handed fist to his temple. Dropping his guard, Ranma immediately stepped inside her arm. His first hit - done with the knife edge of his left hand - caught her striking arm at the elbow, stunning and paralysing it. Not to be overconfident, he brought both arms in for another strike under her armpits. It was not a nice thing to do, but it would work. Rather than limiting her motion by a nerve block, this attack was designed to temporarily cripple both her arms by sending mind blowing pain signals at her slightest movement.

><br> To finish her off, he whipped his left leg past her and swept her feet into the air. As her body moved to horizontal, he finished her off with a palm strike under her chin. The blow slammed her jaw closed, and jerked her head on her spine. All in all, the effect was calculated to deliver a relieving unconsciousness. If he had judged his blow correctly, the armpit nerve strike should wear off just before she regained consciousness.

><br> The entire attack cycle took under a second, so no-one else really saw what was happening. One moment, Ranma had burned bright blue, standing still as Shampoo closed in for the kill. Next, he had moved forward a couple of meters, and an unconscious Shampoo was flying through the air to land like a rag doll.

><br> Ranma sank to one knee and looked up at the Matriarch. He had his Ki under control again, but it felt so low, he hardly needed to conceal it anymore. Actually, his Ki was so low, it would not even manifest visibly unless he forced it. Ranma shuddered. His Ki had not been this low for over three hundred years, and suddenly he could feel every day of it.

><br> "Well, Granny. It would seem I have won the challenge. Tell young Shampoo that her only penance is to learn some respect for the dead. I must bid you good day."

><br> To say that the old woman was surprised was an understatement. When Shampoo had told her of the warrior who had defeated her, she had scarcely believed her. Now she had just seen the near impossible. This man, no more than a boy really, had managed to generate a battle aura that most masters of the art would aspire to. Not only that, but he had managed to channel his Ki to an amazing degree. This one was a prize she would not let escape.

><br> The old woman watched as the boy walked to the exit of the dojo. She had not moved to tend Shampoo yet. She had seen the care he had used when fighting her: Shampoo would survive that final attack without her help. At the door, young Ranma turned and looked back over his shoulder.

><br> "Somehow, Matriarch, I suspect that my real competitor now will be you, not Shampoo. May I have the honour of knowing your name?"

><br> "Of course Son-in-law. I am Cologne, Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku."

><br> "Hmm. I suspected as much. Farewell. We shall meet again. I am sure of it."

><br>

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><br>End Of Chapter

## 17. Letting Go Of The Past

The characters contained within this story are owned by Takahashi Rumiko or Takeuchi Naoko. No infringement of copyright is intended. This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the current author.

><br>This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

><br>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

><br>This story is dedicated to the letters N and T and the number 6/10.

><br>  
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><br> | Destiny's Child |  
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><br>What has gone before:  
><br>While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages. Having finally returned to Japan after 400 years of travel and experience, Ranma is trying to make a new life.

><br>Ranma's (or Tomoe Hotaru as his girl half is known) does not seem capable of having a normal life. He is learning Shinto from Hino Rei, pursued by the boy starved girls of the Sailor Senshi and simply pursued by the enraged demon-pig Ryoga. Just when he was worrying that there were no good martial artists in Tokyo, a certain Amazon arrives claiming the same thing. Well, one thing led to another and can you say "Amazon Law"?

><br>The Outers are plotting, the Inners are confused, and every woman, man and beast on the planet seems to be after Ranma for one reason or another. But Shampoo's great grandmother has a plan to make Ranma theirs. The only problem: That woman is Cologne, a child Ranma was midwife for while in the Amazon tribe, a woman almost a daughter to him.

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><br>Letting Go Of The Past

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><br> The hours turned into days, and the days began to tick by. It would have made an interesting game of cat and mouse, if only they could decide who was the cat, and who was the mouse. Completely unknown to each other, the Outer Senshi pursued Tomoe Hotaru; and Tendo Ranma pursued the two green haired witches and the Jusenkyo cursed boyfriend.

><br> Given the fact that Ranma knew they were evil witches, he was surprised at just how easy it was to dig up information on them. Actually, he would guess that they had only come into their powers recently. If they had been as powerful as they are now, when they were young, surely some indication would have slipped and made it into the popular media or public records.

><br> He had carefully studied the magical fields surrounding them from a distance and knew that they possessed some level of magic beyond the norm. In much the same way that he constantly subdued his aura and camouflaged his magical influence, he could see that they were doing the same. Only someone truly gifted - or with vast experience - could possibly have detected their deception. He was gifted, experienced and knew to look at them, but still the only reason he had spotted their magic was a small magical item each of them carried.

><br> The item itself was a mystery, especially since it's main purpose seemed to be a disguise tool. Without a decent examination he could not be sure, but Ranma suspected that the devices they carried would account for the cloaking that he could see. If they turned them off, then their full powers would be revealed. All he needed to do was be there when they deactivated them.

><br> Information about their powers had been hard to obtain, and the few details he had discovered was of little value. Since leaving the library and the city records over a week ago, he had concentrated on trailing them. All that he had discovered was the definite fact that they were hiding something, and hiding it well. The library and the publicly available records had been much more useful.

><br> After spending almost four hundred years reading, researching and learning, Ranma had study down to a fine art. He did not enjoy study, actually, there were few things he detested more than reading a book that was not directly related to Martial Arts, but he was very good at processing large quantities of paper, and digging out facts.

><br> Armed only with his skills, a pencil, and a writing pad, he had descended on the microfiche newspaper archives of the local library. He already had identified the owners of the house that he had seen the witch and her boyfriend enter: it belonged to the parents of a Miss Kaiou Michiru, a girl about the right age. Armed with this simple fact, he put two and two together to get a close approximation



of four, which shortly revealed a 'Kaious Michiru's Triumphant Concert' article.

><br> What a lovely surprise he had when he saw the picture of his target! Imagine that, he now had a name, a face and an address. From there everything else fell into place just as easily. Reading a few articles in the newspaper finally revealed her boyfriend: Tenou Haruka. This young lad, obviously the sorcerer component of their little coven had apparently been a high profile racing driver for the last few years... until, only a few months ago, he had suddenly dropped out of the circuit and vanished from the public eye.

><br> That made things more definite on the age of their powers. He could not find anything suspicious about Michiru lately, but a small lead was better than none. What was most interesting was the details he could dig up on Haruka and her early years. Yes, her early years. It would seem that Haruka was not actually the boy that most people (including Ranma) had thought. She had a female birth certificate, and he had even tracked down a few photos of her in junior school. Then, suddenly, she seemed to change.

><br> From what could be seen in the newspapers and school records, Haruka went through a lifestyle change just a few years ago. Short haircut, wore a boy's uniform, took up professional motor racing and other little things. Little things like having a girlfriend. Ranma had seen her in her cursed form, and he could attest the fact that she passed for a boy. There was only one conclusion that any person experience with Jusenkyo could reach:

><br> Tenou Haruka had fallen into the Spring of the Drowned Man. Worse still, she was deliberately hiding the information from him.

><br> Ranma wondered how poor Michiru would feel when she discovered that her boyfriend was really a girl. Not only that, but she actually thought she was a man now. Despite how much he needed to know about Jusenkyo, he rejected the idea of threatening to expose Haruka's secret to her friend. Ranma know what it was like to love someone and lose them. He would never cause that pain to someone knowingly. Ranma swore silently to himself that he would never be the one to reveal that Haruka was actually a girl.

><br> After compiling all of this information - including general statistics like age, school and other facts - Ranma had hardly discovered anything on Meiou Setsuna. She seemed to be the enigma of the group. Her general history was as accessible as anybody's, but it was completely dull. Too dull. No one could possibly have an aura of power like she did without having something happening in her life. After much thought, Ranma concluded that she was the leader of the pack.

><br> Since Setsuna was probably the most dangerous, and probably the most experienced, he decided to follow the other two. That was why he was now sitting in a cafe across the street from the two women. Or,

woman and man as they seemed to believe. They seemed to love these long evenings of doing nothing, but it was driving Ranma nuts. Surveillance work sucked.

><br> Across the street, in the cafe in question, the two girls sipped coffee and listened to the gentle music that played. In a completely unconscious gesture, their hands rested on each other. Michiru held her cup in her left hand and sipped, enjoying the warmth. Haruka always seemed to have such warm hands. She could just sit there all night and hold her hand, talking and listening, watching her friend, and watching the world pass them by. So they did sit all evening. Just holding hands and talking about life and love.

><br> No matter how beautiful the evening, or how lovely the company, various pressing issues managed to raise their ugly head in the course of the evening. Not the least of these was the Talismans and the search for the Holy Grail. Their only clue remained the fact that it would be found in the pure Heart Crystal of someone.

><br> A pure heart, but pure what? Their elusive enemy was still out there, and still searching for the right Heart Crystals in the same manner the Outer Senshi were. It was the highly scientific method of randomly selecting someone and ripping their Heart Crystal out for a look.

><br> The best detail that their as-yet-undefined-adversary had let slip was their criteria for judging purity of heart. So far the Daimons and the witches had been going after the people that stood out as dedicated. It was the artists, the sportsmen, the kind and noble. These were the people that the witches had attacked.

><br> Michiru smothered a small chuckle as she thought about just who some of the 'kind and talented' victims had actually been.

><br> Haruka looked at her across the table, her own mouth curling into a slight smile as she appreciated the sound of Michiru's musical laughter. "Care to share it with someone, or are you going to sit there chuckling all night?"

><br> "I was just thinking, the Witches have so far managed to attack all of the Inner Senshi, and take their Heart Crystals. How do you think they'd feel if they knew?"

><br> "Ha! They've had almost all of them at their mercy and they got away. If they knew who they were after, they could be even more of a threat than they already are!"

><br> As soon as she said the words, they both realised just how true they were. Whenever the Inner Senshi had fought the Daimons or Witches, it had been almost even. When the Outers had fought a Daimon

or Witch, they did not fare much better.

><br> Their mirth died a bit then and they sat in silence once more. Eventually it was Haruka which spoke, voicing a concern they both felt. "Michiru, I'm worried about Chibi-Usa's little friend."

><br> "Who, the Tomoe girl?"

><br> A nod. "You've felt it too, haven't you. There is something wrong with her. I know we have not spent much time with her, but... I don't know, something just feels... wrong."

><br> "Setsuna said the same thing yesterday. She's been doing a bit of checking too, you know. She came up with a few rather interesting facts."

><br> Tomoe Souichi was the principle at their school. Actually, he was one of the reasons that they went to that school. Even before they had become Senshi, something drew them together, and drew them to Souichi. The man had a certain, intangible feeling to him. Something which had called to their nascent senses and said 'there is something wrong here!'

><br> "Do you remember how Tomoe-sensei had a lab explosion at his house... several people killed, he and his daughter were injured... that sort of thing? Well, Setsuna-san did a bit of checking on Hotaru at the same time."

><br> "It would seem that this little girl is just as interesting as her father. After the explosion, his injuries were listed as near fatal, but after just a short while in the hospital, he was well enough to get up and take himself and his daughter home."

><br> Haruka was puzzled. "OK, so Tomoe-sensei is strange, but what does that have to do with Hotaru?"

><br> "Well, her injuries were listed as 'fatal'. The doctors did not expect to be able to save her, and that, combined with the fact that he had a live in nurse for her, were the only reasons she was allowed to be released from the hospital."

><br> "Three months after the lab explosion, little Hotaru is back up and about, back at school. No-one had seen her for the last two months, but now she's perfectly well."

><br> Things began to make a little more sense. "So if we add in the fact that she now seems to be able to heal people with a touch, and her father has a constant unreadable aura of some sort..."

><br> Michiru smiled. It was not her normal smile, but a more

predatory smile. "Exactly. What price would a father pay to save his daughter? And what price will she be paying?"

><br> Shaking her head again, Haruka worried on that thought. "The only thing I can think of is that we need to keep watching them. And we warn Chibi-Usa and the Inners. They deserve to know this sort of thing. More importantly, if Hotaru has been... corrupted... we need to protect Chibi-Usa if we can."

><br> They continued to discuss what they could do, and what they knew. In the whole time, they still just sat there, holding hands and sipping coffee. Occasionally, one or both of them would turn their head so that they could watch the people passing by, but they felt no desperate need to be anywhere yet. Michiru's danger sense would alert them to the impending activation of a Daimon in time for them to arrive.

><br> For poor old Ranma, all of this sitting and talking was getting very boring, very quickly. He had been watching these two for several days, and they seemed to do basically the same thing every time. The first night he had been here, he had worked on lip reading, but all they talked about was boring stuff like racing cars or music. Even though he watched them and made sure that they did not do anything without his knowledge, he had quickly stopped bothering to find out what they were saying.

><br> It was a shame really. He had been trying to find out if these witches had any links to the recent crop of demons that he been plaguing the city. If only he had been reading their lips as they spoke tonight... if only he had learned where their true loyalties lay. Instead he had been sitting there, and slipping into a revive, reliving old memories of a witch (no, a sorceress) that he had learned to respect above all others.

><br> It was a place called the Tewon Monastery. Hidden deep in Tibet, and built by magical means on top of a isolated mountain. When he had been only half his current age, he had gone there, seeking knowledge and wisdom. What he had found had changed his life forever.

><br> In the monastery there were senior and junior Monks. The senior Monks were those that had achieved true enlightenment, and spent most of the day contemplating their navels. Ranma had actually reached this level after spending almost 150 years as a junior Monk.

><br> Junior Monks were charged with the investigation of the universe; the senior Monks figured that once they finished that task, they could think up something else for them to investigate. Both through design and circumstances, this had lead to the development of a Monastery for the research of magic. Most people did not believe in magic these days, or were only familiar with the most limited and weakest varieties.

><br> Back in the Amazon village, the practised what they considered 'high' magic. To the Tewon Monks, this was nothing more than beginners warm-ups. Amazon magic worked almost entirely with nature, and was designed to do only the most limited of spells. Although some Amazons (like the occasional Matriarch) could do a decent healing spell, it was hardly above the level of parlour tricks.

><br> The Monks took time to explain to Ranma about the cycles of the world. Currently, we had entered the Fourth World. A time known to the ancient Mayan (yes, the Monks ancestors had been in contact with people half a world away) as a low period in magic. While the magic was still in existence, people had moved away from it. Over time, the knowledge and ability to wield magic had faded from men's minds, reducing them to the mundane level they now had.

><br> It was only through the greatest of natural talents, massive study or some form of magical trigger device that allowed people to access magic now. Most of the Monks at the Monastery had the ability to do a few spells, and most of them required spell books and mountains of ingredients. For a long time, Ranma had been the same.

><br> Ranma did have one advantage though. Anyone else that spent fifty years studying reached the end of their life span. Just as they were beginning to make some real progress, they would roll over and die. Hardly the way to further the march of magical research.

><br> When Ranma had been there for almost a century and knew the history of the Moon Kingdom - as passed through over a hundred generations of people - he was at a level that would have made a novice mage of the Kingdom proud. It was around this time that Ranma managed to - almost - correctly summon the demon Ryoga.

><br> Not long after Ryoga had vanished and he had closed the summoning circle, Ranma spent a week casting a scrying spell. Scrying is art of true seeing, either penetrating illusions or detecting things or people on another continent. By any reasonable standards, the spell was weak and ineffectual, however, it did penetrate the first of the guards that protected the greatest resource of the Tewon Monastery. The Sorceress in the crystal.

><br> Now that he knew that she existed, Ranma was able to discuss the old, frail looking woman with the senior Monks. According to legend, she had appeared on day during the founding of the Monastery. Cryptically, she had said that she needed a Champion. Someone who could carry on her work. She knew that magic was fading (or from her view point: had faded), but she encased herself in the crystal, and begged the Monks: "Try to free me, the first that can will be worthy to learn all that I can teach."

><br> None of the Monks of that era (almost a thousand years prior)

had been able to, nor had any since.

><br> Never able to withstand a challenge, and with the prospect of learning magic from a great Sorceress, Ranma bent himself to the task. The woman - no-one knew her name - was protected from all mundane attacks, and his Ki blasts seemed to go straight through the crystal. It took him almost two decades to develop the magic that he needed. The spell alone took him almost a month to cast, but eventually he succeeded.

><br> The crystal broke, and an old, frail woman fell to the floor, coughing and spluttering. While every nerve in his body called out for him to help her, Ranma was in an equally bad condition. Since he was unable to stay a man for extended periods, his casting had all been done as a small girl. With the inherent inexperience with magic, casting even a mid-level spell like that had left her hopelessly drained. So they lay there together, puffing panting, and sizing each other up, in the same way that a pair of quadriplegics would evaluate each other before a boxing match.

><br> The old woman only needed a short while to study Ranma before she realised that she had been freed by a quirk, a bump in the otherwise steady graph of history. The child before her should not have the power to free her. But she had, and for reasons of her own, Lina needed to keep her pledge.

><br> When they both recovered, Lina and Ranma sat down and talked. Lina explained who she was, and why she was there. Ranma explained his curse, and how he was able to free her, when she was expecting to sleep from almost another ten thousand years.

><br> Her name was Lina Inverse, and quite simply, she was there to help someone else save the world. Lina came from a time, long, long ago. By her rough estimate, it would have been tens - if not hundreds - of thousands of years ago that she was born. When she was young, she had been a wild and reckless Sorceress in a time when magic was easy, and people were in touch with it.

><br> Ranma spent many nights listening to the ageing Lina describe the halcyon days of her youth, where she and her companions had battled bandits, mages, demons and worse. They were heady tales of glory and excitement, and Ranma felt drawn to that era of noble knights and powerful magicians. Lina would never have been described as noble - her interests leaned more towards stealing from bandits - but she was certainly powerful.

><br> In her youth she had battled a fragment of a creature called Shabranigdo. Shabranigdo was a Mazoku. What was a Mazoku, he had asked. A Mazoku was, in essence, the distillation of evil. The Mazoku were the very definition of bad. They were the embodiment of every thing nasty. They... you get the idea.

><br> Shabranigdo was the second most powerful of the Mazoku. He was the sort of guy that had simple goals like the destruction of the world, and the enslavement, torture or annihilation of humanity. Basically he was after the establishment of hell on earth, except just a little bit nastier for all involved.

><br> When she was young, she and her friends had fought one of the shattered fragments of Shabranigdo that had been awoken. So powerful was he, that when he had been defeated (and this was by beings of light that could really be considered gods, and it was done in a time that even she considered a legend...) he could not even be killed. Instead he was shattered, and each of his fragments was hidden on the earth, to let him sleep away eternity.

><br> Fine in theory, but it was a little weak in practice. Other, lesser, Mazoku were still out there, and they were quite capable of influencing the weak willed. Most of the Mazoku wanted to return to the power and glory, and sought to restore their superiors.

><br> When Lina was mature, responsible and venerated (read, she had gotten too well known and it was more profitable to be a good guy than blasting bandits), there had been another uprising. This was led by the lower echelon Mazoku, but the goal was the same, and the results were worse. In a battle that lasted years and scarred continents, the greatest mages from across the world fought the Mazoku and their allies.

><br> In the end, humanity had won out. With a final victory came the resolve to use the massive accumulation of magical talent for something useful. They would bind the Mazoku once again. Although their powers were small compared to the gods, this many high mages would be able to block an lesser group of mages. The strength of the spells they cast would last for over a hundred thousand years before they fully decayed.

><br> They would decay eventually, for the Mazoku were their source of power for black magic. What? You don't know about sources of magic? In a nut shell, you have white magic: that's purely internal. There's elemental magic: magic in rocks and wind and stuff. Shamanistic magic: trees, plants, animals, all that growing type of stuff. Then there was black magic. Black magic sourced it's power directly from the Mazoku. The Mazoku had power to spare, and any black magician could use this power to drive their spells.

><br> But back to the sealing spells that the council of mages cast. They should last for one or two hundred thousand years. Plenty of time, right? Wrong. Almost ten years after the Mazoku had been bound to their entrapments, a scholar had discovered the cycles of magic in the world. According to his calculations, the power of magic would be just starting on the rise from the lowest point it would ever reach.

><br> In short, the first time that the Mazoku might start to break

free, the world would be as weak as it could be. It would be defenceless in the face of magic of their calibre. Sure, demons, and all sorts of nasty creatures would retain their magic and would continue to harass humans, but the power of a strong demon would be about the same as that of the weakest Mazoku. Humanity needed a way to defend itself.

><br> This is where Lina came in. The cycles of magic did not preclude humans from using it, it simply made it hard for people to see it. A mental block as it were. If you had the right sort of magical item, it would open your eyes to the power of magic, and you would be able to cast spells as you needed. The other way you could do things was to be trained by a master Sorcerer. Or a talented, beautiful, and not in the least flat chested Sorceress like Lina Inverse!

><br> When she had volunteered (by the time all of her friends had died of old age and things were getting monumentally boring), a massive assembly of mages again arose. Together they had cast a time warp spell. The conclave had created the Gates Of Time. A place where people could move through time. A place where Lina could move forward to an era where she could lie in wait for someone to train.

><br> When they were finished, the mages concealed the Gates Of Time. They hid them from the world, fearing their power. Once again, with this much magic, none should ever find them, or if they did, the world could be in most serious trouble.

><br> So Lina had arrived in this era, and she had encased herself in the crystal to suspend herself until she was freed. Anyone capable of freeing her would be capable of learning what she had to teach. That some was now a certain Tendo Ranma.

><br> Why teach someone new? Why not just send a powerful mage through to battle the Mazoku as they awoke? First and foremost, no-one who would be capable of doing it, could be trusted to. The sort of power that someone like Lina could wield in this magically weak age was beyond comprehension. The only reason they sent Lina was the fact that she never really cared for power over others, and she was getting so old, she would hardly be able to appreciate any sort of empire she chose to create.

><br> So it happened that Lina taught Ranma. Much to Ranma's dismay, Lina's speciality was black magic. Curing something as simple as his curse would have been easy for any talented white mage of her time... unfortunately, Lina only knew basic white magic, so all she could teach him were a few tricks, and some of the most devastating attack spells you could possibly imagine.

><br> Over the course of a decade, Lina poured all her knowledge into her overburdened pupil. Given his inherent disability, there was no way he could quite have her familiarity, but the fact that he would be able to practice for as many life times as he needed should give



Ranma all of the ease and speed that he would ever need. In the course of her teachings, Lina instructed him on everything from the humble flight spell Ray Wing up to but not including her most powerful attack.

><br> Lina's most powerful spell was the almost completely unknown Giga Slave. Unknown because there were ever only one or two people that knew how to cast it, and since Lina refused to teach him, he doubted that anyone knew it today. Besides, even if he knew, she doubted he would be able to survive the casting long enough to be able to use it. The Giga Slave channelled too much power, it would burn out almost any sorcerer. Even in her prime it was a grave challenge to her, and Lina had the advantage of having a 'special' relationship with the Lord Of Nightmares, the most powerful Mazoku, and the sole source of power for the Giga Slave.

><br> There were lots of spells less powerful than the Giga Slave, and most of them were much more useful. The Giga Slave would be useless against the Lord Of Nightmares, and overkill against anything less than Shabranigdo. Since there was nothing between those two, it limited the selection of targets to one. Since there was also the minor problem that a miscast would pull the Lord Of Nightmares into this world, and guarantee the destruction of the world, Lina decided to take it's secrets to the grave.

><br> Now, the Dragon Slave, on the other hand...

><br> So, over time, Ranma had learned to become a Sorcerer. He doubted he would ever be a match for Lina, but since she had died over a decade before he left the Monastery, it was a moot point. Now he was possibly the most skilled magician alive. From what he had seen on the news, Sailor Moon would be able to outdo him in sheer power, and on average, the other girls could also. As far as skill was concerned, he was almost certain he bested them there. Their strength against his speed and skill, it would be an interesting battle. However, one on one, he figured he could give any of them a hiding... especially since magic was not the core of his abilities.

><br> All this thinking had kept him occupied for hours. So engrossed in his memories, Ranma had almost failed to notice his subjects moving. Both Michiru and Haruka were out of the cafe and moving down the street before he fully woke up. Tossing a handful of coins to the waitress, Ranma left his own cafe and hit the street.

><br> The street was quiet at this time of the evening. Most people had gone home, so it was easy to spot the two girls and they ran into an alley. Thankful of the fact that he was Ranma (almost unknown to them) and not Hotaru (who was possibly too well known) he ran down the street and stuck his head into the alley way. In those next ten seconds, all his work paid off.

><br> As he watched, both girls pulled short, ornate sticks from their pockets and held them aloft, chanting something he was just too

far away to understand. As he watched, their clothes vanished and the alley was bathed in a brilliant white light. Like a pair of exotic dancers, the two girls cavorted on the spot, summoning new clothes and engaging their glamour spell.

><br> This time things were different. This time he had seen the glamour come up from start to finish. As the girls finished their transformation and again ran off, he marvelled at his luck and thanked his perseverance. Since he had witnessed the glamour being activated, he could penetrate it anytime. Now he not only knew that these two were definitely two witches he was interested in, he could also positively identify them any time he saw them.

><br> As he ran off down the alley to follow them, he silently wished that he could watch the pretty soldier in the red skirt do her transformation. Not only would he get a great show but he would find out who the captivating vigilante really was. More importantly, it would make her as angry as Akane had ever gotten, and that would be something to really savour.

><br> Not far away, Mizuno Ami was leading a slightly bored Hino Rei through an exhibition of modern sculptures. Ami had won some free passes from one of the magazines that she subscribed to. Since she had the passes, and none of the other Senshi were particularly interested, she had dragooned Rei into going with her. Rei had been planning on spending an evening teaching and learning with Ranma, but he had cancelled all of their sessions for this week.

><br> While the sculptor responsible for the exhibition talked to several guests, Ami was pointing out some of the interesting details in the sculpture. She had just finished describing the artistic significance of the use of marble as distinct from sandstone for this piece when she noticed Rei's eyes glazing over slightly.

><br> Ami tried hard to feel upset at the other girl. She knew the other girl did not share her interest in art and science, but they had only been here for two and a half hours so far. There was so much more that she could learn!

><br> Eventually Ami's frustration at Rei's inattention got the better of her and she pointed at a man sized sculpture. "Say, Rei-chan, isn't that Ranma?"

><br> Rei's head immediately whipped around to look for the boy, but there was no-one even remotely like him in the area. Most of the people she saw were much older and tended to be either grossly overweight or looked like they had not eaten in the last six months. Certainly none that looked like the handsome and fit Ranma.

><br> Rei turned back to Ami and watched as the quite girl smothered a giggle behind her hand. "I'm sorry, Rei. It just looked like you were falling asleep so I thought that if I mentioned your boyfriend

you might wake up."

><br> "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you \_Ami-chan\_, but I don't think that idiot thinks anything at all of his teacher \_Rei-san\_."

><br> Rei's voice dripped with sarcasm, and Ami immediately realised her mistake. She had seen Ranma several times recently, as had all of the other Senshi. Each and every one of the girls he met he was nice and friendly to. He would laugh and joke with them, and it was always 'Ami-chan' or 'Usagi-chan'. The one person who wanted to have his interest (well, all of them wanted it, but not quite in the same way) he was always teasing and making fun of when the girls were around.

><br> Rei had told them that when they were alone, Ranma would be nice to her... some of the time. Some of the time he would caring and nice, he was a patient teacher, and a great student. But he always called her 'Rei-san'. No matter what she tried, he held onto that level of formality between the two of them.

><br> "I'm sorry, Rei. I shouldn't have said that. I... I was hoping to cheer you up, but it sort of back fired."

><br> As her scowl eased, Rei opened her mouth to accept the apology when people started screaming. Both the girls looked to the disturbance and saw a woman in a revealing red midriff top and short black skirt holding a massive gun in one hand and holding a heart crystal triumphantly in the other. As she laughed, one of the statues was rapidly changing into a Daimon.

><br> With a shared glance the girls turned on the heels and ran for a service corridor. The door leading to it was marked 'Employees Only', but they were sure that the curators of the art gallery would be willing to make an exception in the cast of Pretty Soldiers needing to save one of their talented artists.

><br> Pulling out their henshin sticks, the girls held them aloft and called out their transformation phrase.

><br> "Mars Star Power, Make Up!"

><br> "Mercury Star Power, Make Up!"

><br> The corridor was bathed in flashing lights and fortunately no-one was around to see the girls' clothes vanish as they gave a brief strip show, only to be clad in barely concealing skirts and tight body suits.

><br> Bursting from the corridor, the two girls sprinted through the artwork and came to a skidding halt in front of the witch and her

Daimon.

><br> "Art is there for the edification and entertainment of all people. To attack and harm a great sculptor is an evil act. We are the beautiful sailor suited defenders of love and justice. In the name of the Moon, we shall punish you!"

><br> Unknown to the key parties yet involved, there were three pairs of extra eyes watching as the excitement started. Firstly was the two Outer Senshi lurking in the shadows. The Witch was not in the right position for them to take the heart crystal off her without putting it at risk, so they were happy to wait.

><br> The third set of eyes belonged to none other than Tendo Ranma, still in his male form and glad of it. He had followed the two witches here, and now he could watch what happened when their deception was faced with the real thing. Although details on the pretty magical girl vigilantes was fairly thin, it was quite definite on things like numbers and style of dress. In all of the news there had only been five and a half Sailors. The half being some pint sized trainee Sailor with pink hair.

><br> As soon as he had seen the costumes his two witches had chosen he had known that they were up to no good. They might be able to convince the run of the mill people that they were some of the pretty Sailor girls, but there was no way they could convince him. Now that they were faced with the prospect of being in the same place at the same time, they were obviously cowering and hiding in fear.

><br> Ranma was torn with indecision. Should he stay here, and watch the witches, or should he watch the beautiful, fiery sailor with the short red skirt?

><br> A few days ago he realised that he could magically summon the same sort of disguise that he had used that first time he had watched the Sailors in action. It went against his grain to hide behind a mask, but considering the risk he would be taking, he did not think it would be a good idea to rush into these things. Either the Sailor girls or their enemies might take a dislike to someone who consistently watched their activities. While Ranma had no fears for himself, he was spending a large amount of time at Rei-San's place. If she got hurt...

><br> Wielding his magic, Ranma cloaked himself in a close approximation of formal attire. His suit was not quite right, and the mask (Just like the Dread Pirate Robert in 'The Princess Bride'!) was definitely off, but he was beginning to feel that it had the necessary panache and style for hanging around with good looking girls.

><br> This time as his suit magically appeared, he noticed something different. His ever present staff changed. Rather than the spirit

staff that housed Takuhi, he was holding some long, ridiculous weapon. He almost considered throwing it away; but he liked it. It almost felt like it was made for him.

><br> Looking around he noticed that if he stood on one of the balconies, he could watch both the witches and the fight. Perfect.

><br> As Ranma jumped up to the next level of the art gallery, the Senshi's reinforcements were starting to arrive. While Sailors Mercury and Mars were keeping the bad guys at bay, all of the other girls (and their assorted associates) were slowly arriving. First to arrive was the Pretty Soldier, Sailor Venus and her cat Artemis.

><br> Artemis was fundamentally useless in battle, but he was an excellent observer. Even as his charge waded into the fight, he noticed Tuxedo Kamen arrive and lurk in the upper stories of the gallery. Tuxedo Kamen was not normally a front line fighter like the girls. He relied more on surprise, skill and bolstering the flagging courage of their leader.

><br> As with most battles, Tuxedo Kamen was waiting, preparing a rose for the arrival of his love, Sailor Moon. When - not if - Sailor Moon got into trouble, he would be there to save the day, placing his accurate strike where it would do the most good.

><br> Artemis was quite stunned when a second dark shape stepped out of the darkness and stood by Tuxedo Kamen.

><br> Ranma glanced at the man beside him. "Nice outfit. I guess it must be the fashion for groupies, ne?"

><br> Tuxedo Kamen jumped a foot into the air. How had he managed to appear next to him, completely unannounced? Who was he? What did he want? What the hell was that monstrous weapon he was carrying? It must have been over seven foot long!

><br> While he was feeling startled, the stranger reached out with his free hand and took the rose from between Tuxedo Kamen's unprotesting fingers. "Do you mind if I borrow this? I know just the person who needs it."

><br> With nary a word and just a touch to the forehead in salute, Ranma flipped over the balcony railing and landed not two feet from the startled Outer Senshi in their hiding place. Flashing them a smile, he walked out into the battlefield.

><br> All around him, the Senshi were in full swing, even the Outers decided it was time to join the fun. As he walked across a floor covered in broken sculptures, he deftly avoided Daimon attacks and Senshi attacks with complete aplomb and apparent unconcern.

><br> Since their leader had not arrived yet, the girls seemed to be too weak to defeat the witch and her Daimon. That did not stop them from trying, and the good guys seemed to have inadvertently given the new witches the opening they needed. Screwing up his courage, Ranma clenched the rose in one hand tried to draw a reassuring strength from the weapon he carried.

><br> As lightning flashed around him, Venus Crescent Beams smashed things, Mars Fire ignited them, and they were blasted by the Mercury Bubbles. Finally he reached his target and stood beside the pretty sailor in the red skirt.

><br> Sailor Mars was stunned to say the least. In the middle of a battle, this lunatic had walked straight into the path of the fire. What was even more amazing was fact he was never hit, despite the fact that neither side gave an inch in their attacks. All too soon he was next to her. Next to her and offering her a rose by all appearances.

><br> Taking her eyes off the Daimon for a few precious moments, Sailor Mars looked up into the deep blue eyes of the man in the mask. With a trebling hand, she took the rose, it's fresh green stem and bright red petals in stark relief against the perfect whiteness of her glove. Her heart beat faster and her stomach fluttered. It was the first time anyone had given her a rose, and the man was so... imposing and mysterious in that suit and mask.

><br> The tall, dark, handsome stranger took a step forward, holding her gloved hand gently in his, and planed a kiss upon her knuckle. A massive Daimon tentacle whizzed by his head, only missing him by centimetres, but he paid it no mind. Even as he released her unresisting hand and stepped beside her, another strike missed him. No one could be missed that often or that closely by accident, but how could anyone make it look so easy?

><br> Awe-struck, Sailor Mars swam in his deep eyes, and dimly heard him speaking to her. Concentrating on the words, she finally managed to make them out the haze of her bedazzlement. "My beautiful lady, may I have the honour of knowing your name?"

><br> Forcing life back into her body, Sailor Mars reclaimed her hand and tried to bring a semblance of order into her thoughts. She might have succeeded if not for another tentacle that come to attack the couple standing there. Since they were no longer moving and dodging like all of the other Senshi, the Daimon saw them as easy marks. It realised differently when the massive pole arm descended with a blue glowing blade. Effortlessly it sliced through the tentacle before it could reach her, and the severed limb fell to the ground, returning to the sandstone sculpture it had once been.

><br> That attack brought Sailor Mars back to herself. It might not

have hit her, but it made her realise that she was abandoning her friends to do all of the fighting. Striking a pose, she announced to the stranger: "I am the pretty soldier, Sailor Mars. I am one of the sailor suited defenders of love and justice, now I must go and punish this creature in the name of the Moon."

><br> However reluctant she was to leave, Sailor Mars had her duty. Clenching the rose in her teeth, she brought her hands together and called forth the Mars Fire Soul. As the flames once again engulfed the Daimon, she took stock of the situation. The sculptor was slowly recovering, his crystal apparently returned to him. Witch Eudial had escaped again, and Sailor Moon was only now arriving on the scene.

><br> The full strength of the Inner Senshi managed to put an end to the Daimon in a short time. As she helped finish the monster, Rei had looked around for the Outer Senshi and the mysterious stranger. Both were missing, and she fervently hoped that he was not one of them... something about him just seemed to reach out and grab hold of her heart. For her there really could be only one thing said at a time like this: "Who was that masked man?"

><br> As soon as Sailor Mars - he knew her name now - finished speaking to him, Ranma had jumped for the balcony and an exit. A pretty soldier indeed! Dispelling his weapon and clothes, Ranma left the building and walked home.

><br> He had lost track of the all the witches as they made good on their assorted escapes, but he knew everything he needed to. Despite the battle, he had managed to hear most of what the two he had followed were discussing.

><br> He now knew that there were three factions: the Sailor Girls, the Witch with the Daimon, and the impostor witches that were pretending to be Sailors. The Sailors were definitely the good guys. He refused to believe that the lovely Sailor Mars could possibly be on the wrong side. Not only that, but they had a history of fighting for love and justice, and blah, blah, blah...

><br> The Witch was equally obvious. She was the one who had stolen the heart crystal (a definite no-no), she had created a Daimon (a bit of a no-no) and she had attacked Sailor Mars and her friends (big time no-no).

><br> The fakes were a slightly different matter. They were not quite as bad as the Witch, but they were close. They were definitely opposed to the Sailors, and from the snippets of conversation he had heard, they were just as happy to take the poor man's heart crystal. Their words showed them to be cruel and callous. They were unfeeling, and evil, soulless drones in search of some elusive item contained in pure heart crystals.

><br> As far as Ranma was concerned, these sort of people were

exactly the opposite of those that he liked to associate with. He knew he was a killer. He had killed before, and could kill again if he needed to defend those he loved. But their callous disregard for human life had turned his stomach. A man would die without his heart crystal, and those two had stood there, measuring his up like a car at auction. Only when he failed to meet their elusive standards did they even consider sparing his life.

><br> Killing in self defence is one thing. Premeditated murder is another.

><br> He did not care if the blonde boy had a Jusenkyo curse now. Ranma had survived this long without their help, he could happily wait longer if it meant that he did not need to meet that couple again.

><br> Cheering himself up, he thought of the other great success of the night. He had found out who the perfect girl was in the short red skirt. She was the pretty soldier Sailor Mars. Pretty was hardly the word he would choose - it was far to mild - but he could applaud her modesty. It would hardly do to announce herself as the stunningly attractive and unbelievably sexy Sailor Mars.

><br> As he worked his way home, Ranma chided himself for his weakness. Now that he was getting closer to breaking his Jusenkyo curse, his loyalty and dedication to Akane seemed to be weakening. First he spends almost every spare minute with Rei-san, now he's out checking out the sailor suited defenders of love and justice.

><br> Ranma went home and took a long, cold bath. It helped to relax him immensely. Twelve year old girls were not drenched in the same massive doses of hormones that twenty year old guys received.

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>End Of Chapter <p>

## 18. Fight! Setting An Example

The characters contained within this story are owned by Takahashi Rumiko or Takeuchi Naoko. No infringement of copyright is intended. This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the current author.

><br>This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

><br>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to



it's story timeline...

><br>This story is dedicated to the letter T and the number 2.

><br>

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><br> / \  
><br> | Destiny's Child |  
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><br>What has gone before:

><br>While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages. Having finally returned to Japan after 400 years of travel and experience, Ranma is trying to make a new life.

><br>Ranma's (or Tomoe Hotaru as his girl half is known) does not seem capable of having a normal life. He is learning Shinto from Hino Rei, pursued by the boy starved girls of the Sailor Senshi and simply pursued by the enraged demon-pig Ryoga. Just when he was worrying that there were no good martial artists in Tokyo, a certain Amazon arrives claiming the same thing. Well, one thing led to another and can you say "Amazon Law"?

><br>The Outers are plotting, the Inners are confused, and every woman, man and beast on the planet seems to be after Ranma for one reason or another. Now Ranma's troubles have increased further as he has manifested the powers of Saturn Knight, a masked defender not entirely unlike Tuxedo Kamen. And then there is Sailor Mars...

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><br>Fight! Setting An Example  
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> After the excitement of the last few days, things seemed to settle into a fairly mundane routine. A mundane routine that included Daimon attacks, run-ins with cursed pig demons, magical girl warriors, quasi-immortal super-powered martial artists and time travelling Senshi-in-training. Both 'mundane' and 'routine' all depend on your definitions, really.<p>

><br> This particular Friday looked like it was going to throw a spanner into the works. Nothing exciting had happened all day, and by the evening everything still seemed to be in place for a quiet girls' night out.

><br> Usagi and her friends had headed into one of the many shopping areas that they preferred. Having come straight from school, all the girls were still wearing their cute little sailor style school uniforms, and it was only the absence of the glamour spell that they normally wore that prevented people from saying "Hey, there's the Sailor Senshi, but their all wearing the same colour!"

><br> Two of the regular crowd had not showed up yet. They were Chibi-Usa and her friend Hotaru. Although Sailor Pluto had warned the Senshi that there was something suspicious about the girl, Usagi and her daughter had put their foot down: until they had hard evidence, they were not going to ostracise an already friendless girl.

><br> The pair of Junior School girls were late because Hotaru needed to stop off at her father's place after school to pick up some medicine. While Chibi-Usa waited just inside, Hotaru dashed downstairs and returned moments later having already drunk her medicine. Her face was a nasty green sort of colour for a while, but walking in the fading sunshine of the early evening seemed to clear that up fairly quickly. Chibi-Usa had no idea what sort of medicine her friend was on, she was just glad that she did not need it. It seemed to make Hotaru sicker than whatever illness it was supposed to treat.

><br> They had almost completed their walk to the arcade where they would meet the others when Fate struck again. They had been walking calmly, talking about nothing when a tall girl sprinted in and grabbed Hotaru, spinning her around in the air.

><br> For the first few moments, Hotaru was at a complete loss. Normally her impeccable danger sense warned her of any attack, how could it fail now? Then the woman's words finally penetrated: "Ai-chan! Ai-chan! It's been so long! How are you? I can't believe it! You haven't changed a bit! What are you doing? Where are your parents? Who's this? Why didn't you write?"

><br> Hotaru eventually managed to push herself away from the woman long enough to get a decent look at her face. Instantly cold fear settled into her stomach. 'No! How could she have found me? Just a few more months and I would have been cured!'

><br> "U... Ucchan?"

><br> As Ukyo nodded her head, Tomoe Hotaru (aka Tendo Ai, aka Tendo Ranma) was simultaneously engulfed in another hug. Looking at this woman, Hotaru sighed in defeat and decided to give in to the inevitable reunion. "Ki-chan! I don't believe it! What are you two

doing here?"

><br> After a while, the girls put Hotaru down and looked at her sternly. Both of them were quite normally developed eighteen year olds, and towered over her by at least a foot and a half. Kikyo put on her sternest face (which is almost as stern as Kasumi ever got) and waved a finger at her. "Look here young lady. Do you think you can just run away from your best friends and never write to them? We've been worried sick about you and Ranma."

><br> Before she could begin to defend herself - or even think of a good explanation - Chibi-Usa stepped in and again saved the day. Placing herself between the taller and older girls she looked up at them then back at her friend. "Hotaru, do you know these ladies?"

><br> Ukyo looked dumb struck. "Of course she knows us. We went to school with Ai... Hang on... Hotaru? Are... Are you Ai's little sister? I mean you look just like her. I guess... well..."

><br> Slightly ashamed at how she had deceived her friends, and then later ran off without more than a note, Hotaru nodded her head. "It's me. But my name's Hotaru. Tomoe Hotaru. When I moved in to live with my father, I took the name. It was his daughter's name, and since I'm officially his daughter now..."

><br> Chibi-Usa was stunned. She knew that Hotaru and Ranma had gotten around a bit, but she never realised that Hotaru would have lead an entirely separate life. These must be friends of Ranma who did not mind if she was informal with them. After all, they must be almost six years older than she or Hotaru. Then again, the ladies had also said that they went to school with Hotaru; it must have been one of those really big schools that goes all the way from start to finish, how else would they have met across such an age difference?

><br> Before her friend could get started on a lengthy reunion, Chibi-Usa gave a slight cough and tried to look as innocent as possible. She did not want to be rude, but she wanted to be introduced before her best friend forgot all about her.

><br> "Sorry, Chibi-Usa. Guys, this is Chibi-Usa, she's one of my best friends now. Chibi-Usa, this is Ukyo and Kikyo."

><br> Chibi-Usa bowed to the ladies and gave her brightest smile. "I'm pleased to meet you Ukyo-san, Kikyo-san."

><br> Ukyo was a tall, glamorous looking girl, who was filling out well. She had long brown hair that she had tied back in a white bow. Her face was also very nice, with long smooth planes, and would have been called cute before she was old enough to have matured into her current beauty. While her face and body were good, it was her clothing that caught the most attention. The black leggings and blue

jacket that she wore were tight enough to leave little to the imagination. The thing that garnered the most attention was the bandoleer of small, sharp spatulas that she wore, and the huge - try five foot long - spatula that was strapped to her back.

><br> Her companion - Kikyo - was much more understated. She did not have the fit, lean, energetic look that Ukyo had, despite the fact that she still seemed fit. She was also a much plainer looking girl. Her clothing was less complementary, since she wore a normal looking skirt and blouse. It was a pale blue skirt, and a yellow blouse, decorated with small paint brushes on the collar. Over her back she seemed to have a large tube... maybe it was a drinking straw, just to keep in fashion with her friend.

><br> Both the ladies cringed at being called 'san' by the childhood friend's new best friend. Kikyo bowed back. "Pleased to meet you also, Chibi-Usa-san."

><br> Chibi-Usa made a face like she had just been handed a wet and slimy frog and everyone laughed. Carefully avoiding the rabbit ears, Kikyo patted Chibi-Usa on the head. "Tell you what: I'll call you Chibi-Usa if you call me Ki-chan and her Ucchan. Deal?"

><br> She bobbed her head and smiled in that cute way she has. "Mmmm."

><br> Kikyo turned back to Hotaru and looked her in the eye, well, she looked down at her and stared into her eyes. "Come on, Ai... I mean, Hotaru. Spill the beans. Tell us everything. Where have you been for the last three years?"

><br> "Um, well I've been here for the last three years... I've been living with Tomoe Souichi. He's... He's taking very good care of me."

><br> Ukyo picked off one of her mini-spatula and waved it in a vaguely threatening manner at her. "So... you still training, or can I kick your butt?"

><br> Immediately Chibi-Usa took a couple of steps forward and tried to impose herself between Ukyo and her best friend. She knew how sick Hotaru was. She didn't know what how these girls might have picked on her when she was younger, but there was no way she would let them do it now.

><br> "Grrr, just you stay away! I'm not letting you or anyone else pick on Hotaru-chan!"

><br> For a moment Ukyo looked confused, then she broke out into a massive smile. Beside her, Kikyo had literally fallen onto her

backside she was laughing so hard. For so many years Ucchan and Ai-chan had fought at every meal, training and pushing each other to be better. Kikyo had eventually moved on to become a painter, but she still trained with Ukyo occasionally.

><br> Back in their youth, Ukyo and Ai had been the best fighters in the whole school. Although she was smaller than Ukyo was when she departed (and was even smaller now), Ai would still win almost every time that they fought. The very idea that this small girl would need to defend Ai was ludicrous.

><br> Seeing Ukyo collapse to the ground laughing as well when an angry Chibi-Usa brought up her tiny fists, Hotaru decided it was time to step in. If this continued much longer, someone would get hurt: most likely Kikyo would pass out from lack of oxygen, she was laughing so hard. Placing a hand on Chibi-Usa's shoulder she thought of an explanation that would keep everyone satisfied without answering too many of the real questions.

><br> "Hey, calm down. It's OK. They really are friends of mine. Don't worry, Chibi-Usa. When we were younger Ucchan and I used to train Martial Arts together every day."

><br> "You... you used to fight with them? But they're so much bigger than you are! And you're always so sick!"

><br> That killed the laughter off immediately. "You're sick?"

><br> Hotaru struggled to phrase what she wanted to say correctly. One word out of place could leave everyone with the correct idea of the way things were, and that just would not do. "I was an early bloomer. I was this big a while ago, and then I stopped growing. "I never told any of you this, but I've seen lots of doctors, and they all agreed that I would never really grow up any more. I would be stuck this size forever. Can you imagine never knowing that you would never be as tall as your friends?"

><br> Everyone nodded their heads. Chibi-Usa thought Hotaru was about the right height, but doctors could tell all sorts of things these days. Perhaps... actually, she had no idea why Hotaru would stop growing. Maybe she should ask Ami-chan, she was really smart. Ukyo and Kikyo were nodding because it offered the answer to why she looked the same age she did when they last saw her three years ago.

><br> "Don't worry too much, you see, the man I'm living with, my father, he and his friend actually have a means of curing me. It's taking a while, and the medicine is terrible, but in a couple of months we should see some results."

><br> Chibi-Usa was the first to respond. "So... It's actually the medicine that makes you sick?"

><br> "Yes. But, I need to take it every day as part of the treatment. They've known about my problem for three years, so they've been trying to treat it for a long time. I just keep telling myself it's worth it. "Three years of vile medicine, weakness and all that sort of thing, in exchange for that, I'll have the rest of my life to be me, fully grown, and never having to worry about only being a little girl."I just have to believe that it's worth what I'm going through, and worth the reward in the end."

><br> "So that's why you never tried to get in contact with us."

><br> Hotaru looked up at Kikyo then dropped her head. "I... I had hoped that in a few month's time I would be cured. Then I could spend some time finding old friends and showing them. Just a little longer, and you would never have seen me like this again."

><br> After giving Hotaru a brief hug, Ukyo started leading them down the street. The reunion had made them late, no need to make them later just by staying here. "On the subject of people that just don't write, how's my fiancÃ©e?"

><br> ""Wow! You're engaged? That's great, Ucchan! Congratulations. Is it anyone that I know?"

><br> "I think you know him, it's your brother."

><br> "Huh?"

><br> "Ranma honey. You know I'm engaged to Ran-chan, don't you?"

><br> In silence, Chibi-Usa felt a tear slide down the side of her face. No wonder Ranma was always so nice but distant to Rei. He must be pining away for his fiancÃ©e the whole time that he is with her. Poor Rei, this will crush her when she finds out.

><br> While Chibi-Usa was digesting the fact that Rei's would-be boyfriend was engaged, Hotaru was struggling to breath again, choking and coughing in startlement. After a few swift pats on the back, from her friend, and concerned glances by everyone, Hotaru grabbed Ukyo's lapels and pulled the taller girl down so that their faces were the same height.

><br> In a cold steely voice she said, "What do you mean you're engaged to Ranma?"

><br> "Ai... Hotaru, calm down. I arranged it with your parents. Since we loved each other, I asked them if we could get married."

Hotaru, I don't blame you for this, but is your sickness the reason Ranma never contacted me? Is he just waiting for you to get better so he can come back to me and get married?"

><br> Hotaru let go of Ukyo and walked away for a moment. It was hard to believe his life could become such a mess in such a short time. For three centuries, the most excitement consisted of learning a new spell or new attack. Now, in the space of a couple of months, she had met two girls she liked - Sailor Mars and Rei-san - gotten engaged, sort of, to two - Shampoo and Ucchan - been attacked by a pig demon, and somehow gotten embroiled in a three way battle for the pure hearts of people in Tokyo. How could life get much more confusing or strange?

><br> After a minute of walking in silence, she slowed enough for the other girls to catch up. They could have caught her before, after all, she was suppose to be pretty sick all the time but they knew that she needed some time to think. It could be a surprise to find out that your brother was engaged for the last three years and never told you.

><br> "Ucchan, I think you need to know something. Ranma... He doesn't know. No one ever told him he was engaged to you. When I left my foster parents, he left at the same time. No-one ever told him. I'm sorry."

><br> Ukyo hung her head. "I'm sorry too, Hotaru. I've been searching all over for him for the last three years. I... I really love him. Is... is there anyone else? Does he have another girl?" Silently she asked herself, 'Do I still have a chance?'

><br> "As far as I know, there's only one girl that likes him, and that's Shampoo. She's a Chinese Amazon, and want's to marry him because she lost to him in a fight. That's what she says, but I suspect she likes him too."

><br> It was an emotional roller-coaster for everyone there. Ukyo and Hotaru for the obvious reasons, Kikyo because her caring soul cried out in sympathy for her friends, and Chibi-Usa because of her friendship to both Hotaru and Rei.

><br> When Hotaru was starting her last sentence she had been sure that Hotaru was going to say the only girl that liked Ranma was Rei. But instead, it seems that some completely different girl has caught his eye. Poor Rei. Chibi-Usa realised how close Ranma and Hotaru were, they seemed to tell each other everything. If Hotaru did not think Rei liked Ranma, it was likely Ranma felt the same way.

><br> For a few moments Ukyo looked like she was about to either attack Hotaru, or start a screaming debate with her. Love was always a touchy subject and considering the size of the cooking utensil on her back, it would be even more one sided that normal. Valiantly seeking any distraction she could, Chibi-Usa noted that large drinking straw on Ki-chan's back. Hmmm.

><br> "Ki-chan? You said you were a painter, didn't you? Do you have anything we could see?"

><br> Kikyo smiled and she blushed. She was proud of her work, but sometimes it was hard to be proud without simply boasting. She knew she was good and she had won an art scholarship to a university nearby, but it was still hard taking praise from her friends.

><br> "Well, yes, I've got a couple of things, if your really interested..."

><br> Everyone else immediately began to pester her, and in moments, she had the storage tube (not really another giant utensil!) off her back and was carefully removing one for the poster sized paintings she had done. It was a slightly surreal picture, showing a girl with a massive spatula making Okonomiyaki on a miniature griddle in a world entirely made up of toppings and ingredients.

><br> By the time Kikyo had shown them two more of her samples - a portrait of her mother and a stunning landscape - they were almost at Chibi-Usa's and Hotaru's destination. Both of older girls had been invited to join them for dinner, and while there was a bit of concern about how Rei would take to Ukyo, Hotaru would not dream of abandoning her friends now that she had found them again.

><br> Despite all the fun that they were having now that they were safely away from the topic of fianc es, Hotaru was ever alert for something wrong, and her vigilance paid itself in full. No more than twenty meters away she spotted a tall, well dressed couple sipping coffee. Green hair and blonde, it was the impostors. Wherever they were, trouble was sure to follow.

><br> No-one could say exactly what clue gave it away, but less than two minutes after spotting the witches, Hotaru tackled Chibi-Usa, while Ukyo pushed Kikyo out of the way.

><br> Instantly, Hotaru was rolling back to her feet and taking stock. Chibi-Usa was on the ground with a nasty scratch on her knee and was complaining about being tackled on a concrete pavement. The two witches in their impostor sailor suits were sprinting through a rapidly thinning crowd. The evil Witch from the art exhibition was also there; using her large gun to push a heavy set man out of the way. Not only that, but she had also thrown a Daimon egg at a fruit cart, which was rapidly coming to life.

><br> Looking a few meters away at her friends, Hotaru could see why the Witch was cursing, Kikyo was screaming and crying, holding a limp Ukyo in her lap. Ukyo on the other hand was completely unconscious, with her heart crystal spinning on the ground, forced from her body by Witch Eudial's Heart Buster gun.



><br> No matter how much her own heart called to her to go to Ukyo, she knew she only had one chance with this Daimon. In moments it would be fully formed, and invulnerable to most magic that could be cast in this populated area. Ignoring Chibi-Usa, ignoring the Witch lining up for a second shot, ignoring everything else, Hotaru crouched and placed on hand firmly on the ground, fingers splayed and channelling magical power.

><br> "In the name of Tendo Ranma, I summon TOCHOU!"

><br> First three, then six short blue flares burst from the ground. Like a foot tall blow-torch, these fires were the only visible manifestation of the Tocho. Tocho were spirit creatures, somewhat akin to Takuhi. Where Takuhi was a bird / human cross, these were more of a cross between crabs and cockroaches. Their big advantage was that they could move fast, and their magic fires ripped through almost anything they touched.

><br> Hotaru grinned evilly as the Tocho lived up to their reputation. Moving like chained lightning, the two Tocho tore groves in street, and finally burst upon the forming Daimon. With a horrible squelching noise, bits and pieces of fruit, Daimon, and wooden cart flew everywhere. Another ten seconds and the Daimon would have completed it's growth, and would have been almost invulnerable to anything less than a full scale attack, but now it was gone before it even came.

><br> No matter how well that had worked, things were going to pieces quickly. People were running in all directions, and he was sure he could see the Witch pulling another Daimon egg out. There was no time to worry about her, because bigger things were afoot. The green haired Sailor impostor had just picked up Ukyo's Heart Crystal, and was looking at it like she was buying tomatoes at the store. Time to act again.

><br> Sailor Neptune's fingers had barely closed around the Heart Crystal when she felt a weight land on her back. Even as she jerked upright in an attempt to dislodge it, she was captured. Hotaru's small, nimble arms went around her head. With one arm across her throat and the heel of the other pressing against her head, she could feel the girl's hot breath as she whispered in her ear.

><br> "I don't know why you want it and I don't care. Return Ukyo's Heart Crystal now if you want to live."

><br> When they had first seen Hotaru walking along with Chibi-Usa and the other two girls, the Outer Senshi had been concerned. Their concerns had been realised when Eudial had attacked and released Ukyo's Crystal. What they had not expected was how Hotaru had reacted. They had both seen it with their bare eyes. All it took was some words and a touch and Hotaru had summoned a demon. A demon to

defeat the Daimon: it was almost fitting and now they knew her for the evil that she represented. No-one on the side of love and justice would possibly traffic in spirits and demons like she did.

><br> "Wait, I just--"

><br> Bending her head closer, Hotaru whispered so that only her captive could hear. "I said I don't care what you want it for, and I mean it. Return Ucchan's Heart Crystal now, Kaiou Michiru. If anything happens to Ukyo because of you, I shall hunt you to the ends of the earth. Are you clear?"

><br> Sailor Neptune went white. One of the greatest assets the Senshi possessed was their anonymity. She actually believed it was almost impossible for people to see through their disguises. If Hotaru knew who they were and considered them a threat, there was no underestimating the danger she presented. Slowly she brought her hands into position to cast her Deep Submerge. Sometimes you need to defend yourself against people like her.

><br> Before her hand made it half way to the casting position, her head was forced over to one side. All down the right side of her neck, the tendons stood out, and the joints in her spine began to protest. Gasping in pain, she heard the girls speaking again. "No warnings, put it back or I break your neck now."

><br> Slowly she bent down and placed the Crystal back into the girl's chest. Her only consolation was the fact that as she returned it, she had enough time to make sure that the Crystal did not contain one of the Talismen.

><br> With Ukyo rescued, Hotaru spared the time to check the battle again. Impostor number two was attacking Witch Eudial, and she could see the sailor girls arriving in the distance. Ukyo was recovering, but during their distraction a second Daimon had formed, and taken Kikyo's Heart Crystal.

><br> "You bitch! This is your fault!" As she leapt off Sailor Neptune's back, she delivered a palm heel to the side of her temple. Dazed by the impressively strong blow, Neptune fell to the ground, banging her head yet again as she struggled to regain full consciousness. Trusting that she could leave the witches and her friends to be taken care of by the incoming sailors, Hotaru ran for the Daimon.

><br> Witch Eudial had initially intended to take the Heart Crystal of the painter, but then this girl had appeared. Even as the battle had started, Eudial had realised the inner strength that the girl possessed. She had still extracted the Heart of the painter, but while the Daimon's examination showed it was not what they were after, the unexpected girl was another matter. Now that the Daimon had the girl's attention, it was time to lure her away. With a little

breathing space between her Daimon and the Senshi, they could harvest her at will.

><br> The Daimon, built around a powerful motorcycle was quite happy to lure away the girl. It had no fear of dying, but it valued success for its creator, and the imminent arrival of the Senshi cast a cloud over any expected success. Turning and running, the Daimon gave a toothy, leering smile and ran away. It almost seemed that the strange girl would not follow, but when it waved the Heart Crystal, she followed like a shot from a gun.

><br> The Sailor Senshi arrived at the scene of the battle and tried to find something useful to do. Even as they arrived, Witch Eudial vanished into the crowds, and the Daimon had already run off. Even as they watched, the two Outer Senshi also began to run in the same direction the Daimon had taken. For a moment the Senshi split up, Sailors Mercury and Venus checking on the comatose Kikyo, Mars and Jupiter went to the slowly recovering Ukyo, and Sailor Moon frantically covered Chibi-Usa in a bear hug, holding the sobbing girl close to her.

><br> "I... I'm so sorry, Usagi. I tried. I wanted to help. But... but I couldn't transform... and... and I just felt so \_useless\_"

><br> Chibi-Usa continued to sob onto Sailor Moon's shoulder and the kneeling Senshi held the small girl to her. All the while she muttered soothing words, trying to calm her. Usagi had know what it was like to feel useless. In previous battles she had been rendered totally useless and had seen everyone else fight for her. It was not something she enjoyed.

><br> "It's OK, we're here now. Shh. Shh. Calm down. That's it. Don't worry, we'll make sure everyone's safe. It'll be all right. The Outers have already gone after the Daimon. They'll get the Heart Crystal back."

><br> Chibi-Usa looked around. All the girls were there and by the looks of it, Ucchan was being to recover. Kikyo was still lying on the ground, but Mercury had made her comfortable. She just hoped that the Outers managed to get the Crystal back to her soon enough. If the Heart Crystal was destroyed, or even just kept out of her for long enough, the girl would die. Chibi-Usa did not want her to die, Hotaru's friend had seemed so nice and she had done such lovely paintings.

><br> Hotaru!

><br> Hotaru was nowhere to be seen! Grabbing her mother's arm, her mind in a spin, she pulled her down. "Hotaru's gone! She not here! The Daimon must have her! I didn't see what happened, but somehow she managed to stop the first Daimon from forming, and now the second on has her! Save her, Sailor Moon! Please, save her!"

><br> Righteous anger formed Sailor Moon's face into a mask of hard steel. Immediately she let go of Chibi-Usa and gently moved her to Ukyo. "Take care of them. We'll get her back. Senshi! The Daimon's kidnapped Hotaru! Sailor Mercury, get a trace on it and let's get going!"

><br> With a speed borne of practice, Sailor Mercury pulled down her visor and brought out her computer. In twenty seconds she had a lock on the evil magic that was powering the Daimon, and started to lead them in the right direction.

><br> As they ran at full speed through the city, Sailor Mercury continued to refine her scan. After a short while, she had additional monitors on her visor showing where the Outer Senshi were. Their magic was easy to track, and they had a lead of a couple of kilometres on the Inner Senshi. Unfortunately that put them three kilometres away from the Daimon, and they could not track it as well as she could.

><br> As the chase continued for over twenty minutes, the Inner Senshi managed to cut down the distance between them and the Outers. After another ten minutes running, the Outer Senshi were only 800 meters in front, and the terrain was beginning to change. For a long while they had been sprinting through the suburbs as only the magically enhanced could. Now the suburbs were beginning to thin out and break apart as the many small hills and mountains that spotted Japan made building harder.

><br> The only consolation that could be taken was that although they were now travelling slower over the rising terrain, so was the Daimon.

><br> At the lead of the chase, the Daimon was starting to worry. Somehow, the little girl behind it had managed to keep up this chase for three quarters of an hour. They had left civilisation a while ago, and were now running through forests. It should not be possible for a human to do what she was doing, but it was happening. Surely someone as powerful as her would have a Heart Crystal with a Talisman in it!

><br> Just up ahead the Daimon saw exactly what it was after. A small clearing, just right for fighting in and not a soul for kilometres. There would be no escape. Skidding to a stop, the Daimon leered at the little girl who was panting like a chain smoker. Then again, she should be even worse off than that. An Olympic sprinter could almost manage their speed, but a sprinter could only do it for twenty seconds, not an hour.

><br> Standing on top of the small hill, fifteen meters from it's target, the Daimon raised the Heart Crystal it had used as a decoy in one hand. Long ago it had realised that there was no Talisman in this

Crystal. The only purpose it could serve was to make it's target angry, because an angry fighter is a sloppy fighter, and the Daimon needed this fight to be over before the Senshi arrived, as they surely would.

><br> Even as Hotaru watched, the Daimon raised it's hand and crushed the Heart Crystal. Small pink fragments fell from it's fingers and evaporated on the ground. Hotaru's heart broke as she watched. That action had surely condemned Kikyo to death. Boiling over, she felt the anger take hold. There would be no losing this fight, vengeance would be hers!

><br> Before the Daimon could do anything, she spoke the same words that must have been running through it's mind. "Perfect. All alone, just the two of us. No-one around to interfere. No-one around to save you. I'm going to make an example out of you no-one will forget."

><br> That surprised the Daimon. Usually it was the bad guys that got to make threatening speeches like that. Before the Daimon could really respond, Hotaru brought her hands together in front of her, containing the power, and began to chant.

><br>

\_ "Darkness beyond twilight,"  
><br> "Crimson beyond blood that flows,"  
><br> "Buried in the flow of time."\_

><br> Sailor Mercury gave a start. Power, evil power, and it was growing right next to the Daimon. Over the course of two seconds, the power levels rose enormously.

><br>\_\_

\_ "In thy great name,"  
><br> "I pledge myself to darkness."\_  
><br> Her mouth went dry. So much power. Even as she watched her visor, it kept changing scales. This was like nothing she had ever seen before. No spell should be like this.

><br>\_\_

\_ "Let all the fools,"  
><br> "Who stand in our way,"\_

><br> Mercury's steps began to falter, and the other Senshi looked at her in surprise. Not even Queen Beryl had possessed such evil as this showed. Pure, unadulterated evil. She had never even heard of something so evil.

><br>

\_ "Be destroyed"  
><br> "By the power you and I possess."\_

><br> The power spiked. This is bad. This is really bad. Screaming into her communicator, Mercury offered the only advice she could: "Everyone hit the ground!" She followed her own advice, and the other Senshi were only moments behind her.

><br>

\_ "DRAGON SLAVE!"\_

><br> Then the world went white.

><br> Every Japanese child visits Hiroshima as part of their upbringing. With the education everyone receives on nuclear weapons, it was easy enough to identify this as non-nuclear, there was almost no blast, just a region of destruction. But that was about the only difference. In a massive pick explosion, the entire top of the hill, over a kilometre in radius was simply destroyed. Gone... completely.

><br> There was little or no damage outside the spell area, just a short, fierce wind blowing the trees, but the Senshi were all glad that they had hit the ground. If they had continued just a little bit further, they would have been inside the blast, and there was little question of how they would fare. The Outer Senshi were covered in a cold sweat at this point, they were less than eighty meters from the edge of the blast, seconds of running at the speed they had been doing.

><br> As two groups, the Senshi approached the edge of the crater. Where once there was a small hill, now there was a depression. In a perfectly smooth sphere, centred on the Daimon, eleven hundred meters of landscape was simply missing. Whoever or whatever had cast the spell had made good their escape while the mists covering the detonation cleared.

><br> In time, the Senshi returned to Tokyo. Sailor Moon was silent and slowly crying at the same time. When she returned she would have to be the one who told Chibi-Usa that her best friend had been killed and that Kikyo was also going to die from the loss of her Heart Crystal.

><br> As they walked back, the Senshi quietly discussed what they had seen and felt. That much power was inconceivable. Sure, in the past they had fought people who wanted to conquer the world but they had never fought anyone that could throw nuclear blasts. Had their mysterious enemy actually found one of the Heart Crystals that they were searching for? Was this the result of using a Talisman? What would happen if they decided to do that in Tokyo next time?

><br> As they began to enter the city proper, Sailor Mars walked up to her leader and put her arm on her shoulder. Moon looked over at her, trying to understand this sudden display of affection. "I'm sorry Moon. I know this is going to be hard for you, but we need you. You're the only one that can stop this evil. I know you are."

><br> Sailor Moon returned the hug, crying on her friend's shoulder. She knew life was hard, and she knew that the good guys did not always win but in the past they always had a chance. What could you do against this? How could you win? What allies could you turn to? Who you gunna call?

><br> "Thanks, Sailor Mars." She wiped the tears from her eyes and inhaled a few times. "All right, we know they have a powerful attack. We know they can blow things up. But they never did it before. Maybe they can't do it again. At least, not soon."

><br> Sailor Moon could tell that Mars believed her words as much as she did. She raised her voice so all of the girls could hear.

><br> "Listen to this. They might have some all powerful spell. They might be able to blow up an awful section of the forest just by casting it, but it doesn't change anything."

><br> "We are the Sailor Senshi! We fight for love and justice. We fight for what is right. We fight for the values you cannot destroy with any spell, no matter how powerful. What we stand for cannot be beaten. It cannot be destroyed."

><br> "We cannot be defeated. The only way we can lose is if we give in."

><br> "We are the defenders of the Moon Kingdom. The Kingdom may have been lost for thousands of years, but it shall rise again. We stand for what is right and as long as we stand together, we shine like a light in the darkness."

><br> "We are the light that will guide people to the future they deserve. Never forget that. It is only when you look and see the darkness of your enemies, and forget your own light, it is only then that they can defeat us."

><br> "Stand by me, and we shall be victorious. The Moon Kingdom shall rise again. The people of the Earth shall again know peace, prosperity and happiness!"

><br> When they finally reached the city, they saw a weeping Chibi-Usa, Ukyo and Hotaru all weeping over the body that was once

Kikyo. All of Sailor Moon's words felt like ashes in her mouth.

><br> Elsewhere, the Outer Senshi had changed back to their normal clothes, and they too discussed their fears. When they reached their home, they were more concerned than they had ever been. This sort of magic was beyond their experience.

><br> The only source of hope they had was Setsuna. She was waiting in Michiru's home, sitting on a couch reading a magazine. Joining her, they relayed all that they had seen and heard that morning. None of them could shed any light on Hotaru or her involvement in all of this and they were unsure what they should be most worried about. The fact that Hotaru could summon the Tochou, be they demons or spirit creatures; or the fact that she knew who Sailor Neptune really was.

><br> Worse still was their uncertainty in Hotaru's role in the later events. At the end of the fight, she seemed to vanish, and no-one had seen her as they left to pursue the Daimon. Was she captured, was she hiding, or was she playing a voluntary role in what happened?

><br> Naturally it was Setsuna that finally cut to the chase. "What you really need to ask yourself is this. Which would you prefer... That our foe can cast such magic, or that Sailor Saturn, who may be our ally is now awake?"

><br> What Setsuna definitely did not do was reveal all that she knew; there was no way that the shaken girls could cope with her information now, they needed all the support they could muster. She knew that the magic she felt was not Sailor Saturn's. The power of Saturn's attacks was distinctly different. It was unlike that of any of the other Senshi, and Pluto could have felt it no matter where she was. What was worse, was Sailor Saturn was still asleep. She would have felt it immediately the girl awoke to her power.

><br> Who ever had done today's deed was not Sailor Saturn, no matter what she might imply to the others. Somehow that scared her, and scared her deeply.

><br> Even as Ranma cried over the loss of his friend, some small hidden part of him smiled. In a world that had even forgotten the name of Shabranigdo, let alone his power, what he had cast today would be fair warning.

><br> Notice had been given: do not oppose the sailor girls and their allies, for the consequences are dire indeed.

><br>---

><br>End Of Chapter



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><br>This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. We also have guest appearances by Slayers and 3x3 Eyes.

><br>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...

><br>This story is dedicated to the letter M and the number -4.6.

><br>  
>Visit my website at<br>  
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><br> / \  
><br> | Destiny's Child |  
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><br>  
><br>What has gone before:  
><br>While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with very hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages. Having finally returned to Japan after 400 years of travel and experience, Ranma is trying to make a new life.

><br>Ranma's (or Tomoe Hotaru as his girl half is known) does not seem capable of having a normal life. He is learning Shinto from Hino Rei, pursued by the boy starved girls of the Sailor Senshi and simply pursued by the enraged demon-pig Ryoga, and unbeknownst to him, his girl half's best friend is a time travelling Senshi-in-training. Just when he was worrying that there were no good martial artists in Tokyo, a certain Amazon arrives claiming the same thing. Well, one thing led to another and can you say "Amazon Law"?

><br>The Outers are plotting, the Inners are confused, and every woman, man and beast on the planet seems to be after Ranma for one reason or another. Now Ranma's troubles have increased further as he has manifested the powers of Saturn Knight, a masked defender not entirely unlike Tuxedo Kamen. And then there is Sailor Mars...

><br>-----  
><br>Aftermath  
><br>-----

><br>  
> Chibi-Usa sat in her room, staring at the wall. For the last two hours, she had been sitting there, patting the black cat that she held in her lap. In the entire time she did not say one thing, just sitting and patting.<p>

><br> Like any cat, Luna was a complete hedonist when it came to being petted. There was nothing that she liked more than being fawned over and cared for. Given the slightest opportunity she would lie in the sunlight, or stretch across a warm lap. Warm laps like Chibi-Usa's were preferable because they often came with attentive arms, and those arms would have hands that were just perfect for stroking her back.

><br> Chibi-Usa was so much better at this than Usagi. Although Usagi's heart was in the right place, she often had the unfortunate tendency to beat her pet when she was trying to be nice. Chibi-Usa on the other hand had the whole deal down pat - no pun intended. She stroked the right direction, firm without being rough, and she remembered to scratch just behind the head, on the back of the neck where it was often so hard to get the right sort of attention.

><br> Luna purred. She could take this sort of treatment for hours.

><br> It was at that thought Luna realised that she had been receiving this treatment for hours. Not less than two hours had passed since Chibi-Usa had come home, picked her up without a word, and retreated to her room. While she would often give the cat a quick pat, it was entirely unusual for her to spend this much time just caring for her.

><br> Craning her neck, Luna looked up at Chibi-Usa and studied the girl's face. Although her hands made all the right motions, her face showed that her concentration was on something other than looking after a cat. The little girl's red eyes were unfocused and she stared into the middle distance. Watching her for a minute, Luna realised that she must have been like this the entire time. That indicated deep thought, and Chibi-Usa was a growing girl. She should be up and about, not brooding over difficult problems all afternoon.

><br> Luna knew that when Neo-Queen Serenity had sent her daughter back in time, she must have expected Luna to be there to help look after her. Luna knew she was the most level headed of any of the people Chibi-Usa would be associating with. She was supposed to be the responsible and wise one. Luna was the one that was supposed to provide the guardianship for the girl, and she was in some sort of

trouble or quandary, it was her job to sort it out.

><br> "Chibi-Usa... Chibi-Usa... What's wrong, Chibi-Usa? What are you worried about?"

><br> The girl looked down and her face fell. Chibi-Usa looked like she was about to cry. Standing on her rear paws, Luna leaned on the girl and tried to give her a hug. Soon she responded and hugged the cat back, cradling Luna to her chest.

><br> "Oh, Luna. I don't know what to do. I've got all these problems, and there's no-one I can tell. I've been sitting here for so long, and I still don't know what to do."

><br> "There, there. It's OK. You can tell me. I'm sure that whatever your problem is, we can get the rest of the Senshi to help, and it will be solved in no time."

><br> "But we can't! That's the whole problem. It's about one of the Senshi. And I can't tell her because I don't the real truth. If I tell her something, or she finds out because of me, then it might just make matters worse. Oh, Luna. I don't know what to do."

><br> "Chibi-Usa, you know what I do these days, do you? What I did in the Moon Kingdom, and what I'm still doing in the time that you come from. You know what my job is, don't you, Chibi-Usa?"

><br> "Yes... You're the Queen's advisor. Or your Usagi's keeper I suppose."

><br> A small chuckle. Things can't be too bad if she is making jokes. "That's right. I'm the Queen's advisor. Do you know what that means? It means I help the Queen make her decisions. If she has a problem, then I'm here to help her. I can offer advice, and I can offer a ear to listen. Just talking about your problems can often make them so much smaller."

><br> "I don't know, Luna. I mean... I've always been told it's bad to spread rumours. If I start telling you everything I know, then I'm going to be starting some pretty bad rumours."

><br> "You don't have to worry about that, child. That's why I'm an advisor. The Queen - or you - could tell me anything, and it would never go any further. I can only offer advice if you tell me what's worrying you."

><br> Sitting Luna on the bed, Chibi-Usa looked at the cat and put on a stern face. "OK, Luna. I need your advice on this, and you better not tell anyone else. "There's this boy Rei likes."

><br> "Yes. Ranma."

><br> "Well, what you probably did not know is I think he's Hotaru's brother. Rei know this, so far."

><br> "What do you mean you think he's her brother? This could be very serious if he is."

><br> "Oh, Luna! You've been listening to all those horrible things that Puu has been saying about Hotaru-chan, haven't you? Well they can't be true. She's the nicest, kindest and sweetest girl I know. There's no way that she's helping the bad guys. I just know it! I don't care what Sailor Pluto says!"

><br> "But I'm a bit unsure about something. Rei once asked Hotaru if Ranma was her brother, and she said 'We have the same parents...' Why wouldn't she say yes? Is there any way that she couldn't be his brother if that have the same parents?"

><br> "Anyway. Hotaru and Ranma are really close. I think they talk about everything. But the day there was that big explosion... you know the one... that day, when I was out walking with Hotaru we ran into some friends of Ranma and her."

><br> "Before... Before... Before Ki-chan..."

><br> Chibi-Usa sniffled a little, and Luna rubbed her head against her in sympathy. She had never met Kikyo but from what Chibi-Usa had said, Kikyo must have been a very nice girl. It was probably the first time that Chibi-Usa had seen a dead person. It is never pretty, and the first time is always the worst. Chibi-Usa was fortunate that she had so many caring and supportive friends.

><br> After a time, Chibi-Usa had calmed enough to resume her story. "Earlier we were talking, and Ucchan was saying that she was Ranma's fianc  e. But Hotaru didn't know anything about it. But she did think that Ranma was going out with some other girl called Shampoo."

><br> "Not only that, but he's always so nice to the other Senshi when they come over to the shrine to see Rei. If he's there, he's so nice and sweet, and..."

><br> "What if he's just playing with her? What if he doesn't care about Rei at all? Hotaru never said that he did, and he never seems to notice her. Ranma's a nice guy, but what if he doesn't care about Rei? Maybe he already has a fianc  e.. or even two? Shouldn't Rei know?"

><br> Luna nodded her head. "I certainly think she should. Why don't you ask Hotaru or Ranma? Maybe one of them could clear things up. Perhaps Rei should learn to let go of him. If he has a fiancée, she shouldn't be coming between them."

><br> "Are you saying that because Ranma is Hotaru's brother? She is not a bad person, Luna. You've never met her, but just wait until you do. I'm sure you'll get on really well."

><br> "And I've tried to speak to Ranma and Hotaru. No-one, not even Rei, knows where Ranma lives. None of the other girls do either. I think he must be a really private person."

><br> "I also went over to Hotaru's place three times in the last two days. Kaori never lets me in, and she just says that Hotaru is out. Nothing else. I can't find either of them, and I need to ask them."

><br> "Not only that, but Ki-chan was one of Hotaru's best friends before she came here to live with her father. She must be really sad, and she's all alone."

><br> "How can I help my best friend if I can't even find her?"

><br> Luna had no answer for that one. All she could do was suggest that Chibi-Usa was doing the right thing so far. Given the situation, Rei should know but they could afford to wait for a couple of days until they got the facts straight from the horse's mouth.

><br> On the subject of facts from the source, Luna had pursued the idea of asking Ukyo herself about her relationship with Ranma. She might not know Shampoo - a name like that was too hard to forget, and too much of a joke not to be mentioned to all her friends - but she would surely be able to say what her relationship was like with Ranma. If Ukyo was really engaged to him, it would put an end to Rei's romance very quickly.

><br> Unfortunately for all of them, Chibi-Usa had already thought of that one. She had also visited "Ucchan's Okonomiyaki". Ukyo had opened a Okonomiyaki restaurant only days before Chibi-Usa and Hotaru had bumped into her. When the Senshi had left to change back into school girls, Chibi-Usa had gone with Ukyo and Hotaru when they went to put Ukyo to bed. The poor girl had been devastated by the loss of her life long friend, and Hotaru had been in a bad state as well.

><br> After seeing Ukyo to sleep, Chibi-Usa had taken Hotaru home, only to then return and deal with her own concerned relatives. So far she was the only one that knew that Ukyo and Kikyo were much more than innocent bystanders. That state of affairs could not last long. As Usagi's friend Naru - or even Hotaru - could vouch, when things got crazy around here, it tended to drag the bystanders down with the

people involved.

><br> Blocks away, at the Hikawa Shrine, Rei sat and tried to study. Like the rest of the Senshi she had not been able to stay around the scene of Kikyo's death for long. The Senshi relied heavily on their anonymity, and it was too much of a risk to stay around Chibi-Usa and Hotaru at that point. Besides, by the time they had returned, there were police, ambulances, and a huge crowd of onlookers.

><br> After Sailor Moon had seen that her daughter and her friend were all right, the girls retreated slightly and found somewhere to change. By the time they had managed to fight their way through the throng and reach the centre, the disturbance was beginning to dissipate. Chibi-Usa, Hotaru, and Ukyo had already left the scene, and Kikyo had been taken away somewhere.

><br> Rei gave a slight shake and tried not to think about that too much. In the past the Senshi had always managed to save the people who were attacked. But not this time. This time, they had failed. This time someone innocent had been the victim. From what few facts Rei had heard, they were lucky that Hotaru was still alive.

><br> Although she only had the news second hand from Usagi, she thought that Chibi-Usa had been almost out of her mind with worry about Hotaru. For over an hour, Hotaru had vanished. No-one knew where she was; just 'poof' and she disappeared into thin air. An hour when her best friends were tearing their hair out in fear. The only second hand information Rei had said that she simply appeared through the police line and had joined them crying over Kikyo's corpse as it was being loaded into the back of an ambulance.

><br> Damn, back to Kikyo again.

><br> She knew the stakes they were fighting for, they all did. They were all willing to give their lives for their Princess, and to protect the future of the earth. Actually, they all had sacrificed their lives, only to be resurrected by the Moon Princess and the Silver Imperium Crystal. They knew that the Negaverse, and all the others since then had been bent on world wide destruction or domination. No doubt their current adversary had similarly grand plans.

><br> Even the fact that she was the reincarnation of the original Sailor Mars from the Moon Kingdom - and had memories of countless friends being slain during the Negaverse's attack - even that did not help harden her against the death of someone so innocent. The look of pure anguish on Ukyo's face, the frozen mask on Hotaru's, and that horrible look of adult realisation on Chibi-Usa's. All these things would stay with her till the day she died, and somehow she knew that the world had just become a colder and harder place for those three.

><br> A knock on her bedroom door made her eyes dash to the clock. Wow. She had come straight from school, and now she had done absolutely no study in the past two hours. As soon as she had finished with this disturbance, she would really need to get some work done, or else she would never get into a decent college.

><br> Turning to face the door, she called admittance and smiled in pleasant surprise as Makoto came in. The tall athletic girl was smiling as she brought some tea on a tray. Rei was always glad to see her. Not only was she the fearsome Sailor Jupiter, she was also a damn good cook. Whenever she came over, good food was sure to follow.

><br> "Come on in Mako-chan. Have a seat."

><br> Sitting on the bed, Makoto passed her a cup of tea and offered her a small plate of home cooked cookies. What did I say about good food? All she had to do now was hope that Usagi would not drop in and she might actually get to eat more than one biscuit.

><br> "Mm, this is great! Say, aren't you training tonight?"

><br> She shrugged. "Well, I was, but, well, the Sensei couldn't come. I, um, I think he has a personal problem tonight and he couldn't make it."

><br> Rei nodded and sipped her tea again. Personal problems seemed to be the standard fare for the moment. Ranma had called her yesterday and begged off from their training, sighting 'a personal problem'. The pervert was probably out chasing girls, not hanging around with some dowdy temple maiden. At least, that was Usagi's suggestion.

><br> "So how's this mystery Sensei you keep hinting at?"

><br> The tall girl blushed deeply. A couple of weeks ago she had told them all that she was taking some martial arts classes at a dojo nearby. Even though she was the best in the class, she suspected that most of the people there had joined just to see the Sensei sweat; and watch the way his firmly muscled chest moved so well when the Gi opened slightly.

><br> Makoto coughed to hide the flush of excitement. She knew she should not keep secrets from her friend, but the Sensei was always so nice to her that she did not want to give up her chances with him to anyone. Besides, Ranma obviously liked her: he had met her once before at Rei's shrine, but the very first time she turned up at the dojo he had waved and called her 'Mako-chan'. Besides, even Ranma's little sister, the girl Hotaru that was always hanging around Chibi-Usa, she seemed to like her too. At least Hotaru had never said anything against her and Ranma.

><br> That was the real reason why Rei had not been told that she was taking classes from Ranma: when ever Rei was absent from the group, Hotaru tended to say the nastiest things. Hotaru would call her 'uncute' and a 'tomboy', saying that she was too slow, and weak and all sorts of things. It rarely came out as a direct attack on the girl, but Makoto realised the one place that a girl like Hotaru would learn to say such things. Obviously Ranma had been telling his sister what he really thought about the Shinto Priestess-to-be, and Hotaru was just parroting it.

><br> Since Rei spoke about Ranma in the same uncomplimentary terms - terms usually reserved for talking about Usagi - some times, Makoto had decided that she deserved a shot at Ranma. Obviously there was no real love between him and Rei, so it was not as though she was stepping on anyone's toes.

><br> Taking her mind of her constant boyfriend problems, Makoto started up a conversation with Rei. Implicitly, neither of them spoke about their Senshi problems. Even since that big blast, no-one had discussed it. Against that sort of magic, there did not seem to be much they could do differently from what they were doing. When they found out who cast it, they could defend themselves. Until that time, they just put it to a side, skirting around the issue.

><br> They had been talking for fifteen minutes when another knock came at the door. "Don't worry, it's probably just Grandfather telling me to get back to my study and stop gossiping. Come in!"

><br> The person that came through the door was about as far from Rei's grandfather as you could possibly get. He was tall and strong, handsome and of noble bearing, and the girls peeped at him, not the other way around.

><br> "Ranma!" They both said simultaneously.

><br> A small, crooked smile lit his face briefly, but it faded back into an iron mask of control, just like Rei had seen Hotaru wearing. They really were a close family, they looked so similar.

><br> "Hey, Rei-san, Mako-chan. Sorry I had to cancel the class tonight Mako-chan. I... Something came up."

><br> Rei turned a suspicious eye to her friend. "C-cancelled the class? Didn't you say your cute 'almost boyfriend' Sensei cancelled the class?"

><br> "Um, yeah, well, you see, Rei. Um, it's like this..."



><br> Rei tossed a book at Ranma, catching him squarely in the forehead. "Oh, so now you're trying to seduce all my friends are you?"

><br> Ranma back peddled and waved his hands in front of him, almost as though he was expecting Rei to strike him with something much larger and heavier. "No, no! It's not like that at all!"

><br> An evil gleam appeared in Rei's eyes. "Oh, really? So you've stopped trying to seduce my friends?"

><br> "Yes!"

><br> "You admit to the fact that you've been seducing all the girls in the class?"

><br> Bonk! A bedroom slipper bounced off his head. "No, I mean I never---"

><br> "No? No? So you're still seducing them? Mako-chan, how can you say anything nice about a guy like this? He's chasing after every girl he sees."

><br> Without waiting for a reply, Rei launched into another tirade, abusing the boy soundly. The whole time she yelled abuse at him and angrily shook her finger, but Ranma just stood there cringing and suffering whatever she offered. He was not completely passive, however. In the insults department he gave as good as he got, managing to insult her looks, her intelligence, and everything else about her that he could think of.

><br> It was the first time Makoto had seen them together for almost a week. In that time, their relationship seemed to have gotten even worse. The 'cold shoulder' routine that they had initially evolved had degenerated into a full blown name-calling session.

><br> It was almost educational to watch them. Two grown teenagers (or even possibly an adult... no-one knew what Ranma's age actually was) insulting each other like a pair of eight year olds. After two minutes of senseless name calling, they started to repeat themselves, advancing tactics to see who could insult the other the loudest.

><br> A couple of months ago when Rei had first told the Senshi about the new student at the shrine she fancied, Makoto would never have dreamed of trying to get him as a boyfriend, even if he was really cute. Now she felt completely vindicated. Not only was it obvious that Rei could barely tolerate him, he appeared to feel the same way about her.

><br> Something else struck her as odd about his behaviour. First and foremost, Rei seemed to hit him in the head every time she threw something. Makoto had only trained with Ranma a few times but she knew from first hand experience just how good he was at dodging. To say that Ranma was good was an understatement. Makoto could not think of anyone in the dojo over about eight years old that could actually hit him.

><br> In the dojo, Ranma was grease lightning, and as slippery as a fairy penguin near an oil tanker. Even when he was on his knees to even the height difference for young opponents, he seemed to be a master of not being where a punch would land. None of the teenage or adult students in the class had even come close to hitting him once. The little kids were another matter. Ranma seemed to take a positive delight in sparring with the youngest members of the class; he enjoyed it considerably more than fighting the odd black belt who turned up for his classes, and the black belts should be more in his league.

><br> Ranma ran a free kids class immediately before the adults class he ran to support the dojo. The adults class was something he did out of duty to the dojo: a task needed to keep the dojo running. The children's class was different. All of the little kids liked training under Ranma, and he seemed to enjoy it more than they did. Every class he would spend some time sparing with the kids, and they would take delight in attacking him, or making him call out in pain as they applied some for of pain hold.

><br> In the end though, it did not matter who Ranma was training, or who he was fighting, he was unfailingly friendly. Even when some hot headed challenger - with too much testosterone and too little brains - arrived, he would gently put them back in their place. Sure he might push a few of their buttons to make them angry and show them how it left them vulnerable, but he never insulted anyone like he was currently doing to Rei.

><br> Listening to his shouts of 'Tomboy' and 'Uncute', Makoto wondered how they ever got any training done when Ranma came here to study Shinto. Maybe Rei had actually passed that job onto her grandfather since she hated his guts so much.

><br> After waiting for a lull in the insults which never came, Makoto came to her feet and yelled at them both: "QUIET!"

><br> Both of them were stunned. They were so completely immersed in their argument that they had forgotten about Makoto. Looking sheepish, they both apologised. After a moment of silence, Makoto asked Ranma if he could wait outside while she finished her conversation with Rei.

><br> "Um, actually, I need to speak to Rei, it's really important..."

><br> "Idiot! Don't be so rude. She asked you nicely. You can't just come in here and expect us to drop everything. Just wait outside for a couple of minutes and we'll be ready."

><br> Ranma favoured them with one of his small, cocky smiles and walked out the door. Even as he turned and left, Makoto could see the smile fall from his face, and a mask take its place. It was a mask she recognised. It was the same sort of mask that she had seen Hotaru wearing the day that she had seen her friend killed. Somehow, Makoto knew that it was Ranma that taught the little girl to hide her feelings like that. It could not be a good way to live, and Makoto realised that both Ranma and Hotaru must be in some sort of pain at the moment.

><br> Rei brushed some hair back from her eyes and calmed herself as she sat down again. Oh, that boy could be so irritating. It was amazing. No-one else in the world could get under her skin as quickly as he did and she could not understand what it was that got her mad so quickly.

><br> "Rei-chan, you realise that Ramna's never tried anything at the dojo... don't you?"

><br> She sighed. "Yes... Yes, I know. It's just... It's just he seems to go out of his way to try and make me feel bad. He's always telling me how uncute I am, and how I'm such a tomboy... I'm not a tomboy, am I, Mako-chan?"

><br> Makoto slid over and put an arm around her friend's shoulder. "Of course you're not, Rei-chan. Come on, everyone knows you're really pretty. I could get a dozen guys here tonight and you could have your pick of guys."

><br> "Humph. That's what I told the insensitive idiot. But he just keeps calling me names."

><br> Makoto stirred uneasily in her seat and looked down at her hands for a moment. "Listen, Rei-chan. I guess I might have been wrong for not telling you I was training with Ranma. It's just that you two seem to fight all the time. I thought... well.. I was wondering if you minded if I asked him out at some stage."

><br> "WHAT?"

><br> "But you two are always fighting. You keep insulting him, and he only makes you unhappy. I've seen you after he's been here. You just sit there staring at the wall and you snap at anyone that tries to talk to you."

><br> "I do? I guess I do, now that you mention it. But it's like Usagi-chan. I... I think I feel the same way about both of them, but I different ways, I mean, somehow I really like them both. Trying to talk to either of them is an up hill battle. Usagi-chan's such a klutz and Ranma's such an... an annoying boy. Every time I try and say something nice to them, they managed to do something and it seems as though their trying to upset me."

><br> Makoto blushed. "I... I never knew you felt like that about Usagi."

><br> "Well, she's my Princess, and I guess I do love her, no matter what I say about her. If you tell her that, I'll deny every word of it! Besides, she would never believe you."

><br> "I think I understand now. I want you to know that I'll always be your friend, no matter what your preferences are. I think you'd realise that Usagi's pretty keen on Mamoru."

><br> "What on earth are you talking about?"

><br> "Well, you just told me that you love Usagi, and since Ranma and Hotaru are always calling you a tomboy and that gets you mad, I thought..."

><br> "IDIOT! It's not like that at all, she our Princess, of course I love her... Hang on. What do you mean Hotaru calls me a tomboy? She's always such a perfect little girl when she's here. Hotaru-chan doesn't come here often but she is always nice and sweet and kind. Not like her idiot brother."

><br> Outside the door Ranma heard the cry of 'idiot' and decided Rei-san was calling his name. Walking to the door he failed to hear any more entreaties to enter, so he stood there and listened for a moment. When he caught the rest of her sentence he considered just how right she was.

><br> 'Of course Hotaru is a perfect little girl. Girl's are supposed to be nice, and no-one cares if two girls like each other, it's not as though they can ever be anything more than friends. Besides, being a girl has it's uses. Girl's don't have to hide their feelings like guys do. A girl can be nice to Rei-san just because she likes her. If a guy was nice to an uncute tomboy like her... who knows where things might lead.'

><br> 'Don't go there, Ranma.' He told himself. 'Don't even think about that one. Not only is she an angry, uncute, uncaring, tomboy, who's legs are to thick and her chest is too flat; she's young enough to be your to be your... um... your great-great-great-great... Hang on, try that again. Great-great-great-great...'

><br> He was still thinking about this deep and vexing question when Rei opened the door. She had expected to catch him eavesdropping, but instead she found him standing in the middle of the hall mumbling something about how great things were. Sighing heavily, as though it was actually a chore for her - rather than something she desired in a strange fashion - Rei gestured him into the room.

><br> After poking his tongue out at Rei-san and giving Mako-chan a wink, Ranma sobered and clenched his hands in front of him. There was a reason he came here, a reason he came to Rei-san in particular. That very reason was making it so much harder to be able to do what needed to be done, and all because of that reason in the first place.

><br> Ranma was old. Really old. No matter how he might try and pretend to be a normal kid, or act like the young man he was supposed to be, he had experienced things that no-one his age should possibly have experienced. Through the years he had seen people maimed or killed in wars, and had seen people die from anything between infant death, to old age; accidents to executions. Somehow, the pain was still there, but he had learned to live with it. Ucchan had not.

><br> The days since Ki-chan's death, Ucchan had almost folded up upon herself. In the space of a few hours she had found a long lost friend, only to discover that she was terribly ill and receiving some sort of horrible treatment. Added to that, the man that was supposed to be her fiancé was apparently completely unaware of the situation and may well have his own love. This might have been enough to break most people, but Kuonji Ukyo was made of tougher stuff.

><br> The sort of tragedy that it took to crush Ukyo's spirit was something along the lines of: meet your sickly best friend, find out that your fiancé is unaware of the arrangement, have a witch steal the physical embodiment of your soul only to be told that your soul is not good enough to be worth their while, toss in a monster attack, then spend a terrified hour as one friend is missing and another's life ebbs away as you cradle her in your arms.

><br> Ukyo was strong enough to be able to cope with the fiancé thing, after all, she had three years to get used to the idea that the man of her dreams had run out on her. She might have come out of the torture of believing her best friend Tendo Ai had been carried off or worse; the pain of sitting the an endless, useless, futile hour waiting and wondering at her friend's fate.

><br> All these things can be overcome. Kikyo was someone special however. The two of them had grown up together. They had gone to Elementary school, Junior School and High School together. They both had plans to go to university together. Every day of their lives, the pair had been inseparable. They were best friends in every sense of the words.

><br> Ukyo had also been there for the last day of Kikyo's life. She had spent an agonised hour holding her friend. Kikyo had been rendered unconscious when her heart crystal was stolen, which spared her the pain. Ukyo had been the one that held her, had stared into her eyes as they closed that last time, and had felt it as he pulse slowed and stopped.

><br> Now Ukyo was falling apart and despite all of his training and all of his experience, there was nothing that Ranma could do to put her back together. For too long Ranma had spent his days cloistered away in mountainous retreats, hidden from the world, knowing only other ageing monks. He could offer Ukyo the wisdom of the ages, but that would not bring back Ki-chan, nothing would. The only thing he really knew how to do was fight, and that was no use here.

><br> Now her was in front of Rei-san, wanting to beg for help, and he could not even get that right. Rei-san was a temple maiden. This was her job: it was what she had been training her whole life for. She was the person supposed to be able to provide religious and spiritual guidance to those in need. She was supposed to be the one who had the experience and the knowledge to help the sick, the grieving and the suffering.

><br> But how do you ask someone to do this? How can you so openly reveal a friend's weaknesses? How are you supposed to throw yourself on the mercies of someone you yell at every day? Before he met Akane and after she died, Ranma knew that there was only one person you could count on in this world: yourself. How do you admit your own failings and short comings to someone who you can hold in respect?

><br> Before he realised what had happened, Ranma had been standing in Rei's doorway for almost five minutes, looking at his hands, out the window, or anywhere other than at Rei. The whole time he had been saying things like: "Um..." or perhaps: "Ah... you see" or even the highly descriptive: "Rei, you see it's like this... no..."

><br> Both Rei and Makoto were literally on the edge of their seats with anticipation. What on earth could it be that he wanted to say that was so important to him? Rei was entertaining thoughts that alternated between him deciding to declare his undying love for her, or the equally terrifying thought that he had come to declare his undying love for Makoto, an equally disturbing possibility. Makoto entertained exactly the same thoughts.

><br> By the time he reached the seven minute mark, the girls' patience had worn thin, especially since both of them had personalities on the more aggressive and action oriented end of the spectrum. Sharing glances, Rei turned back to the dithering Ranma and gave him her best glare. The one she saved for Usagi, and all those times that she had burst into tears just when they needed her. "Ranma! Just spit it out!"

><br> That seemed to do it. He stopped dithering. He looked at the

floor and took a deep breath. Then he looked Rei in the eyes. Although his eyes were their same blue-grey they always were, there was something... different. Somehow, across the room, she could see the intensity of his emotions, feel the strength of his struggle as he forced out the words:

><br> "Rei-san. I need your help with a girl I really like."

><br> Hmm. Judging by their reactions that might not have been the right wording.

><br> "No, no, no! What I mean to say is: one of my best friends from school was just killed, and her best friend held her as she died. "Please, Rei-san, please. You have to help me. I'm... I'm no good with all this talking stuff. And... Ucchan's hurting. I need to help her and I just don't know what to do. Please, Rei-san. You're my only hope."

><br> It was like the sun coming out from behind the clouds as realisation dawned on the girls. When they understood what he meant, understanding hit them like a slap in the face. Feeling guilty they both realised that while they had been thinking about themselves and how they felt about Ranma, he had been thinking about his suffering friend.

><br> Although Ranma did not know it, both of these girls were Sailor Senshi, and they had been there when Kikyo had been attacked. In the days since, they had spoken to Chibi-Usa and received even more information. That was why their rudeness and preoccupation hit them so hard. Ranma had no way of knowing that they knew about his problem, but they did. How could they say they were his friends if they concentrated on themselves when someone they knew was suffering.

><br> Makoto was the first to respond. Blushing and feeling guilty, she walked up and laid a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry Ranma. Chibi-Usa had mentioned that something had happened to a friend of yours, I sorry, I just forgot for a while there. Is... is there anything I can do?"

><br> Shaking his head, Ranma offered her a smile, but she could see the other emotion he kept bottled up. She had only known him a while but Makoto knew him well enough to understand the frustration he would be feeling at the moment. It was the same sort of frustration she had felt so often about the loss of her parents in the plane crash. Sometimes there is nothing you can do, but that does not make doing nothing any easier.

><br> "Ranma... if you need me... anything... please, just call. I'll always be here for you."

><br> With that she slipped past him and stepped out into the hallway. As much as she wanted to help, there was nothing she could do and it was not her place to do anything. Walking out of the house Makoto was thankful that Rei would be with him. Since trouble tended to hit the same target more than once, having one of the Sailor Senshi with them should make Ranma and Ukyo as safe as they could be.

><br> After Makoto left the room, Rei looked up at Ranma and the concerned look on his face.

><br> "I'm sorry too, Ranma. Just let me get some things together and we can go and see Ukyo. Where is she at the moment?"

><br> "Ucchan's got an Okonomiyaki restaurant not far from where we were attacked. We can be there in about five minutes on the bus."

><br> Rei nodded and finished packing things into a small carry bag. It was her first time actually doing the sort of counselling work that sometimes came with being a Shinto Priestess. The truth be told, she was so nervous, she wanted to sit down and start drinking some of the relaxing herbal tea that she had just put in the bag. If she was tense or not, Ranma was right: he was basically an insensitive idiot who kept putting his foot in his mouth. OK, things might not be quite that bad. Often one of the best things for someone who was suffering was just to have something comforting and familiar; an anchor to stabilise themselves.

><br> Religion was often about providing a security blanket or the assurances that people needed in the modern world. With her training, Rei may well be able to reach Ukyo when even her closest friend could not. The again, perhaps even Ukyo's friend needed help too.

><br> "Bag's packed and we're ready to go! Umm, Ranma... rather than taking the bus, do you think we can walk instead? If you can give me a few details before we arrive, it might make things easier."

><br> Ranma nodded and opened the door to Rei's room again, revealing her Grandfather standing next to the door. Giving the man a quick bow, Ranma stepped past him and waited for Rei to follow. He was surprise when Grandfather Hino stepped into the room and closed the door after himself. Shaking his head, Ranma leaned against the wall. Rei certainly was a popular girl: everyone wanted to talk to her. He wondered if they would actually get to Ucchan's tonight.

><br> The withered and shrunken priest of the Hikawa Shrine looked up at his tall and beautiful granddaughter. Sometimes she looked so much like her mother it made him want to cry.

><br> "Oh, Rei-chan. Going for a romantic evening walk with that handsome young man of yours. Have a pleasant time, remember your



keys; there's no rush to get home early."

><br> Rei blushed as red as the skirt she sometimes wore.  
"Graaaaamps! It not like that at all. Ranma's got a friend that needs some help, so I'm going over to talk to her. We should be back in plenty of time. Remember this is a school night."

><br> When she had her hand on the door knob, he ran a hand through his remaining hair. "I spoke to your father yesterday."

><br> That stopped her mid-motion. Her father was too rich and busy to spend time with his daughter. That was why she was here at the Shrine with her grandfather. She loved him dearly but some days she wished she could have a normal life and live with her parents.

><br> "That's very nice to here. Is Father well?"

><br> "He is well. I told him you were well also. Actually, I told him you had a boyfriend. He asked me when the wedding was, you know. He trusts my judgement, Rei-chan. You should too. This is not the 1600's. We don't do arranged marriages or anything like that anymore, but we can help our children to get off to a good start in life."

><br> "It also means that you don't need to wait for the young man there to ask you, you can ask yourself. I could ask for you if you want."

><br> If she kept blushing this much today she would probably burst a blood vessel. "Grandfather! Don't even say such things!"

><br> "I just thought you ought to know. Your father and I both approve of the young man. He could help you take over the Shrine when I am too old. And you're such a lovely couple. Remember, if you're interested, I can speak to Ranma about an engagement."

><br> Fearing that the conversation would degenerate further, Rei pulled open the door and ran outside. Taking Ranma's hand she pulled him through the house, barely giving him time to put his shoes on before they ran down the road.

><br> After a while she calmed down and walked beside Ranma. On the way to Ucchan's she alternately wondered whether Ranma had heard what her grandfather had been saying, and worried about Ranma's past.

><br> Now that she was looking for it - since Ranma was confronting an emotional burden - Rei could begin to see the way that Ranma had cocooned his emotions. As they walked she tried to get him to open up, to tell her what he was feeling. All she wanted was to get a few of the details of what his life had been like before being reunited

with his father Tomoe Souichi. From the little bits she had managed to gather from previous talks with Ranma and Hotaru-chan, the two of them had spent considerable amount of time travelling.

><br> By the time she reached Ucchan's, Rei was sure of two things. Firstly, Ranma was quite aware of what she was trying to do, but he had no interest in trying to unburden his soul. Unless she asked a direct question, he quite carefully avoided giving her the sort of historical information that she wanted. Even when she asked a direct question he usually avoided giving a real answer. Secondly, he was really worried about his friend. Not once in the entire trip did he start an argument or do anything as insensitive as he usually did.

><br> The one thing she was not sure about was even more important to her. She knew she liked Ranma but she could not understand why she wanted to help him so much. Why did she care like this? He was just an insensitive idiot... wasn't he?

><br> Eventually Ranma pushed open the door to the restaurant and they stepped inside. It was quite nicely appointed, even if it looked like it was done on the cheap. A large grill in the corner and small table and chairs for diners. No-one was there now, as the grand opening had been delayed due to 'unforeseen circumstances'.

><br> Up some stairs, and past the bathroom, Ranma did not even bother to knock before he pushed open the door to what turned out to be Ukyo's bedroom. The girl was wearing a dressing gown and was curled up in a foetal position, looking at a framed photo of Ukyo, Kikyo and Ranma. Ukyo and Kikyo looked younger, but Ranma looked exactly the same as he did now.

><br> The way the Ukyo was withdrawing Rei realised that Kikyo must have been her one real friend in a strange city. To see her die had hurt the girl badly. Fortunately for Rei, Ranma's first sentence seemed to bring life back into the girl, and a certain fire into her eyes. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Ranma pointed to Rei.

><br> "Cute fiancÃ©e, meet my uncute fiancÃ©e."

><br> Even as a competitive life returned to Ukyo, Rei cursed to herself. 'Damn! He heard!'

><br>

\* \* \*

><br> It was close to midnight; hours later and quite distant from the small restaurant when Kaiou Michiru awoke screaming. It was three days since the horrid experience and every night since she had woken at least once. Each nightmare was different, but they were all the same in some way.

><br> Before she had even gathered her breaths from those gut wrenching screams she felt a pair of strong arms hold her close. Fighting back tears, Michiru held onto her friend, drawing strength from her closeness and her care.

><br> Tonight and the previous evening Haruka had quietly but forcefully insisted on watching over Michiru as she slept. While she was the same calm and composed girl by day, Haruka knew her well enough to see how badly the nightmares were affecting her. After the first night, Michiru had spent her lunch break sequestered away with Haruka, pouring her heart out as she was consumed with guilt.

><br> That was the key to Michiru's nightmares: imagined guilt, it was also the reason that Haruka had insisted on being with her this evening. Haruka and Michiru both knew that what they were doing as Senshi was the right thing but that did not make it any easier to deal with the anguish that arose when something went wrong, as it so obviously did with Hotaru and Chibi-Usa's friend.

><br> Sailor Pluto had dropped around yesterday. She did not say how she knew that Michiru was having nightmares. Pluto had ignored the question entirely to spend time giving both of the younger girls a short lecture.

><br> "I know you are having a hard time at the moment, especially you Michiru-chan. There is nothing that you or I can do to bring the girl back. All that I can do is offer you the consolation that you did the right thing."

><br> "It may not seem correct now, and the decisions you made will cause you more pain before the price has been fully paid... but it was the correct decision. The necessary one."

><br> "There is so much more that I wish I can tell you. So much more that, while it won't make the pain go away, it would make your suffering more meaningful."

><br> "But I can't."

><br> "Knowledge of the future is a burden. It is an agony of knowing when something will go wrong, and never being able to fix it. I don't want to say this, but I need to: you have to believe Kikyo's death was necessary. I..."

><br> "I can't tell you any more. I wish to the Kami that I did not know what I do now, but I do. Remember you are not alone in your pain."

><br> That was all she had said, then she had walked out again. Neither Michiru nor Haruka could understand what would make her say that a completely innocent girl's death is necessary, but Setsuna had never lied to them before.

><br> What Setsuna had not revealed was how or why she knew this sort of information. Her job was to guard the Gates Of Time, to ensure that paradoxes did not occur, to ensure that the Moon Kingdom's future would again arrive. After hearing the girls' report, Setsuna had watched the event happen. She saw the Dragon Slave. She felt it evil power. She knew that without assistance an enemy that could do that sort of damage could defeat the Senshi and kill millions of innocent people.

><br> So she cheated.

><br> She already knew that Crystal Tokyo would exist some day. Some day, the Senshi would again be the glorious guardians of the solar system. It was her job to make sure that no-one used time travel to derail that goal. While she was supposed to aid the Outer Senshi, she had her own dominion to guard, and a foe that could cast the Dragon Slave could well be a traveller from the future, trying to destroy the Moon Kingdom while it was at its weakest.

><br> She had travelled forwards at the Gates Of Time. Time travel was an activity she engaged in most cautiously, every instance and every reason was always carefully analysed. As with the last time she had done this, she arrived at the Gates only a century or so from the foundation of Crystal Tokyo. Sketching a short bow, she welcomed herself. Of course the Setsuna from the future was here. She always was when Setsuna needed to speak to her. After all, the person she was about to speak to was herself, and thus remembered the conversation they were about to have.

><br> "I can't answer all your questions, you know that."

><br> "Yes. The danger is too great... What was it? What happened that day? Is this someone trying to create a paradox?"

><br> The Setsuna from the future gave an carefully shielded smile. "It was a spell called the 'Dragon Slave'. Although it was evil, you know who cast the spell: you saw her, and she is not the person to fear. Before you ask: yes, Kikyo's death was necessary. You cannot tell anyone else, but her death is a key event in making Sailor Saturn into the person we need."

><br> "I... I don't understand."

><br> "I remember."

><br> "Is it time yet? Can you tell me why Chibi-Usa? She's just a girl. I don't care what Their Majesties may have said, what possible justification can there be for sending her through time?"

><br> "I still cannot say. You will know some day."

><br> Time. That was what this was about. Setsuna had not been able to tell Haruka and Michiru all of the facts because of the danger to the time stream. For that reason, Michiru needed time to recover from these nightmares that haunted her. The answer to one would solve the other, but fixing either of them would imperil the world through the introduction of paradoxes.

><br> So Haruka held Michiru and helped her recover from the nightmare as best she could.

><br> "Do you want to tell me about it?"

><br> Michiru eased back slightly and looked around as she gathered her thoughts. A book was open, spilled on the floor in the small pool of light next to a chair. Poor Haruka must have fallen asleep watching her again.

><br> "I was walking through the city. It was early evening, just like the other day. All around me were bodies. People were just lying in the streets, and their Heart Crystals were right next to them."

><br> "As fast as I could, I was running through the city. I don't know why, I just had to get somewhere. But every step I'd take, I had to stop and check the Heart Crystals nearby."

><br> "There were just so many of them. It went on and on."

><br> "Eventually I pick up one particular Crystal, and the person sits up, even though she hasn't got her Crystal. Her head turns around, I mean right around, and she looks at me with these dead eyes."

><br> "It was Kikyo, Haruka. She just looks at me with these dead eyes, and says 'You killed me. You killed me.' Over and over again. She just doesn't stop"

><br> "Now I'm just standing there, and I can't move. I want to run away, but I can't. All I can hear is Kikyo saying that I killed her."

><br> "The next thing I know, there's a huge crowd around us. It's all the people in the city, all looking at me with their dead eyes."

At the front of the crowd: it all the people who we've saved... and they're asking me 'Would you kill me like you killed Kikyo?'

><br> "All this time I'm Sailor Neptune, OK? But then one small girl walks out of the crowd. It's Hotaru, and she's the only one that isn't dead. She's standing there, glaring at me, holding this big glowing ball in her hands."

><br> "'You killed her Kaiou Michiru. You killed them all. I told you I'd get you if you hurt them Michiru.'"

><br> "She knows who I am, even though I'm a Sailor at the time. She hates me so much. Then she lets go of the ball and it explodes like a bomb."

><br> "I'm in the middle of the blast, and I can see it destroying everything, and the people, they weren't dead, but they are now. I can see them burning up, and it's all my fault."

><br> "It's my fault because I didn't help them."

><br> "It's my fault because I let her die."

><br> "It's..."

><br> Haruka silenced her with a gentle kiss. Gripping her tightly, she rocked the other girl back and forwards, feeling the way Michiru's tears soaked through her shirt. "It's not your fault. Remember it's just a dream."

><br> Michiru only had one more nightmare that night. At school the next day, she looked a little tired, but other than that there was no reflection of the torture she had suffered that night. Drawing from the deep well of inner strength that she possessed, Michiru soldiered on. No matter how much she disliked what needed to be done, she would do it. She would do it with Haruka by her side.

><br> Always by her side.

><br>

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>End Of Chapter <p>

## 20. Enter Saturn Knight!

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><br>This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make

the two stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow my head in shame: please forgive. P  
><br>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to it's story timeline...P  
><br>This story is dedicated to the TV show Sesame Street.P  
><br>  
>Visit my website at<br>dzillman@ozemail.com.au<br>

>http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fireP

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> \br

> | Destiny's Child |br<br> \\_\_\_\_\_/P

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><br>What has gone before:br

>While on a training trip with his father, Ranma fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he spends most of the time in his cursed form. Not only that, but since the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old girl who never ages. Having finally returned to Japan after 400 years of travel and experience, Ranma is trying to make a new life.P<br>

>Ranma's (or Tomoe Hotaru as his girl half is known) does not seem capable of having a normal life. He is learning Shinto from Hino Rei, pursued by the boy starved girls of the Sailor Senshi and simply pursued by the enraged demon-pig Ryoga, and unbeknownst to him, his girl half's best friend is a time travelling Senshi-in-training. Just when he was worrying that there were no good martial artists in Tokyo, a certain Amazon arrives claiming the same thing. Well, one thing led to another and can you say "Amazon Law"? Of course, there's that "little matter" with Ucchan too.P<br>

>The Outers are plotting, the Inners are confused, and every woman, man and beast on the planet seems to be after Ranma for one reason or another. Now Ranma's troubles have increased further as he has manifested the powers of Saturn Knight, a masked defender not entirely unlike Tuxedo Kamen. And then there is Sailor Mars...P<br>

>-----br<br>Enter Saturn Knight!br

>-----P<br>

> Everyone was gathered at Ami's place. Perhaps that was not so unusual since her mother was working late at the hospital - again. What made this particular Senshi meeting unusual was the fact the Sailor Mars had called for an emergency meeting, and that the Outer Senshi were there. P<br>

> Even the elusive and enigmatic Meiou Setsuna was there, making one of her rare and dramatic appearances. Rei had not managed to get into contact with her since she decided to call the meeting, nor had the other Outer Senshi... Setsuna had just appeared at Ami's door and wandered in; no explanation was given as to why she was there, nor was there any explaining how she knew about the meeting. Setsuna had just given a guarded smile and walked past Ami when she opened the door.P<br>

> The Guardian of Time was currently sitting off to one side of the room, doing her best to look wise and dignified. This was made a little bit difficult by the small girl that was sitting on her knee bouncing up and down. Sailor Pluto was one of Chibi-Usa's friends in the future and the small girl regretted the fact that she could not see much of her at the present.P<br>

> Eventually everyone was there and had started on the snacks that

Ami's mother had left for them. That is, most people had started; Usagi was most of the way through Rei's portion having already finished her own share. While she shovelled the food into her face as fast as she could, she was obviously eyeing up who else she could steal some food from. Watching the path of her friends eyes, Makoto sighed and nudged the plate in her direction. Makoto rationalised that she needed to loose weight for the gymnastics anyway.P<br>  
> Rei stood up and brushed an errant strand of hair back from her face. "OK, everyone."P<br>  
> A hush fell over the room, broken only by the sound of chips being forced down Usagi's throat. After a moment of listening to the 'rattle, crunch, crunch' noises, Minako gave her a nudge and whispered in her ear. "Shhh, I think Rei wants to say something."P<br>  
> Big blue eyes looked up at the brunette and she asked innocently, "Did you, Rei-chan?"P<br>  
> Rei threw up her hands in disgust. "Of course I did! Why else do you think I called for an emergency meeting?"P<br>  
> Makoto chimed in: "You wanted to tell us you were giving up on Ranma to pursue your mystery boyfriend?"P<br>  
> "No!" Rei blushed furiously. "I'm not giving up Ranma! Besides, it's not as though were even going out together or anything."P<br>  
  
> "No, you just spend every evening together 'studying'. Hey, even Ami-chan doesn't study that much."P<br>  
> Now it looked like Rei's face was as red as the skirt she sometimes wore. Blushing as strongly and as often as she has been lately would no doubt lead to a coronary if she keeps it up.P<br>  
> "She does too! Besides... study is all we ever do..."P<br>  
> Her voice dwindled off and the Senshi had the good grace to look sheepish. It was all good fun to tease her about what might have been happening, but only if it actually might have been. Unfortunately for Rei, everyone was quite familiar with the fact that Ranma and Rei got on like a jar of nitro-glycerine at a jackhammer convention. It was like someone took everything good and perfect and right from Usagi's relationship with Mamoru and made sure that Ranma and Rei had none of those moments.P<br>  
> After a moments silence, Rei looked up again and pulled some folded paper from her pocket. "Remember the Daimon attack yesterday? Well, our mysterious friend was there, and he gave me a letter this time."P<br>  
> Most of the girls nodded. Setsuna looked blank... or was she really hiding vast knowledge and intricate plans behind a facade of false ignorance? Usagi just looked confused. As Rei started to read the letter, she rudely butted in again.P<br>  
> "Who are we talking about?"P<br>  
> Minako gave the girl a nudge. "Come on, Usagi-chan. Not even you could forget the handsome tuxedo suited boy that's been chatting to Sailor Mars."P<br>  
> Brows came down and little fists clenched. "Oh, you better not be cheating on me, Mamoru. I'll make you \_so\_ sorry!"P<br>  
> Before the much maligned Mamoru had a chance to defend himself, someone piped up.P<br>  
> "Not Tuxedo Kamen, the other guy."P<br>  
> "Huh? What other guy?"P<br>  
> As the Senshi started to pick on her, Ami put her book on the floor and walked over to sit next to Usagi. "You know, I think she might be right. I really don't think they've ever been in the same place at the same time."P<br>  
> Luna threw in her two cents also. "That would also explain why I



have no recollection of who you are talking about. I am usually escorting Sailor Moon and since she always arrives late, it would explain why neither of us have seen this man. Artemis? Have you seen him?"P<br>

> The white cat stretched self indulgently on her person's lap and looked at Luna with sleepy eyes. "Yeah, sure. Lots of times. He's always there these days. I haven't had a close look yet since I'm smart enough to stay out of the fighting and he's silly enough to try and talk to Mars in the middle of the fight... But, yes, I've seen him."<br>

> Luna batted Artemis' nose with one paw. "Silly cat! Why didn't you tell me something as important as this? It could be vital information, and you've been keeping it from me."P<br>

> "Right, and I'm sure that you would have made great use of it even if you did know. Besides, its not as if there's anything you could do about it, is there?"P<br>

> Luna was opening her mouth to reply when Rei jumped to her feet and cried out. "QUIET!"P<br>

> Everyone fell into stunned silence. Rei was standing there with her fists tightly clenched at her sides. "I've got some really important information here, and you've not giving me a chance to tell you."P<br>

> "Humph, you're just saying that because your boyfriend gave it to you."P<br>

> Minako looked rather cowered under the harsh gaze that was levelled at her. When she was sure everyone would remain silent for at least a few minutes, Rei opened up the pages she was holding and began to read.P<br>

> "To the pretty soldier Sailor Mars and her friends." That earned a few snickers. They might introduce themselves that way, but none of them actually thought of themselves as Pretty Soldier So-And-So. When there was quiet, she resumed.P<br>

> "The first and by no means most important part of this letter is to clear up something that might be worrying you. Recently I have looked into the auras of you and your friends and seen new traces of fear. "Fear for what I ask myself? What could possibly make the... er... the sexy soldier Sailor Mars..."P<br>

> This time she had to stop for a while. The laughter was just too loud to continue.P<br>

> "What could possibly make... Sailor Mars afraid? What was worth worrying about? I wracked my brain, and I tried to divine what it was that would upset you so. Your enemies have not changed, and despite being set upon from all sides, you triumph at every turn. What could possibly make you worry so, and how could I ease your fears. Then I realised: you know nothing about the Dragon Slave."P<br>

> Ami perked up hearing that. It was a leading statement, promising to divulge more of the secrets of the universe to her ever hungry brain. Joining in with the others, she badgered Rei: 'What was the Dragon Slave?', 'Do dragons really exist?', 'How does he know anything?', 'Can we trust this information?', 'Are there more chips?', 'How does this affect us?'P<br>

> This time it was Setsuna that quietened the room. Although her voice was soft, it held the strength of wisdom. Over the time that they had known her, all of the Senshi had learned to listen when she spoke. You might not always understand what she was saying, but it was always worth hearing.P<br>

> "You would be wise to listen to what Rei has to say. What she is about to reveal of the Dragon Slave may well change your views on how things are to unfold."P<br>

> Inside Setsuna cheered herself. She had recognised the name 'Dragon

Slave', and now she had an opportunity to demonstrate her supposedly perfect foreknowledge. True, she was older and wiser than any of the Senshi, so she could do a good job of guiding them, but she deliberately did not know everything that was to come. Not only would it spoil the surprise but it represented an unacceptable danger of creating a temporal paradox. Most times - like now - all she needed to do was nudge the girls in the right direction with a few well chosen words.P<br>

> When it came to wise sounding statements that contained very little real meaning, Meiou Setsuna excelled beyond anyone politician ever born.P<br>

> Rei looked down at the paper and began to read again.P<br>

> "I have watched your fights and realised something important: both yourselves and your enemies are White Sorceresses."P<br>

> That statement caused a few mumbles of discontent. How could he place the Sailor Senshi into the same category as the Witches Eudial or Kaolinite? For that matter, how could he describe the Witches as being White Sorceresses? White was the colour of the good guys... surely.P<br>

> When the comments subsided, Rei sighed in frustration and continued.P<br>

> "White magic is the magical power derived from within a single person. This is not to say that bad, horrible people cannot use White magic, they just use it for evil purposes."P<br>

> "Elemental magic is another form of focus..." Rei put in a comment of her own here. "I suspect that Ail and Ann used Elemental magic, after all, they got their power from draining things around them. Holy magic is power given to the caster by the Gods, this is not to be confused with Spiritual power, the power of the human spirit is something completely separate to magic, and developed in a different manner. Finally, there is Black magic. Black magic uses another source of power, and it is that source that defines the magic as Black. I will not go into details because of the dangers involved, but suffice it to say that the Dragon Slave is a fraction of the power that the source of Black magic can deliver."P<br>

> "Black magic takes some of this power and uses it for the caster's purpose. The caster does not need to be evil to cast this magic... but it is often the situation. The Dragon Slave is one of the most powerful spells available to Black Magic, and a skilled caster can rival the power of a minor god for short periods of time and in small areas. Take heart, pretty soldiers. The caster of the Dragon Slave is on your side. The destruction of the Daimon in such a manner is an object lesson for those who would oppose us. Victory will be ours, and we shall smite our enemies in glorious battle."P<br>

> As the Senshi let that start to settle in, Rei read out the short paragraph at the bottom of the page. P<br>

> "You do not need to fear the source of the Black magic becoming active or malignant. I have it on the best authority that in this era, all those that supply the power are completely incapacitated. Besides, if they were capable of acting, you, I and everyone else would be nothing more than chaff for them to harvest as they desired, such is their power compared to ours."P<br>

> "The source of the power is not my concern, and neither should it be yours. I am writing this to tell you that you have nothing to fear from the caster of the Dragon Slave. We are all on the same side. All fighting for the one cause, all striving to protect our Queen and those we love. United we stand, and we shall never be defeated."P<br>

> Rei looks up from the paper and looks at the girls and their cats. "He just signs it: 'With you until the end and beyond.'"P<br>

> When she stopped talking, there was a moments silence, then everyone began to speak at once. Ideas flashed back and forwards as people tried to make sense of what they heard. This went on for a while until Ami's normally quite voice rose and brought calm to the room.P<br>

> "We can't go on like this. I'm sure we know all the answers, it's just that we probably don't know what the right questions are. First things first, let's make sure everyone is clear on who gave us this information. For the last month or so there's been another man dressed like Tuxedo Kamen appearing at the start of the fights. He usually only stays around for a little while, then he leaves again."P<br>

> Minako wiggled her eyebrows at Rei: "He only stays long enough to give his darling Sailor Mars a rose or chocolates or something. Then he's off again."P<br>

> "It was my rose he gave her the first time, too." Gripped Mamoru. He had a light tone in his voice to reassure Rei that he did not mind, but his comment drew a few chuckles nonetheless. P<br>

> Rei leaped to his defence. "I don't think he actually runs away. I'm actually pretty sure that he's still around somewhere... he's just hiding. I'm not sure how I know... I'm just sure that he's there watching over me. I think he realises that I have a job to do, and he doesn't want to interrupt it."P<br>

> Ami cleared her throat. "We're getting off the topic again. Let's get together a description, and see if anyone can recognise who he actually is. I think it's probably safe to assume that he is related to either the Moon Kingdom or our current adversaries in some way. Since he seem keen on Sailor Mars, we can probably say he's not an enemy."P<br>

> "He wears black pants and a white shirt, just like Tuxedo Kamen."P<br> "He's got this really big black cape."P

> "He's got a black mask... not white like Tuxedo Kamen's."P<br> "True, but remember, his mask is actually part of... I don't know... a scarf or something that covers his whole head."P

> "I've never seen him use magic! Remember, he held off the Daimon for a while this morning while Sailor Mars was busy with the fruit juice for breakfast."P<br>

> The other scouts added various features that they remembered, Rei even mentioned his piercing blue eyes. She was the only one that had received a good enough look at him to vouch for that, so no-one disputed it.P<br>

> As the description built up, Luna began to look concerned, or as concerned as a cat can look. Even though Chibi-Usa was sitting on her knee, Setsuna also became agitated. After a time she set the girl on the floor and began to pace slightly. At the sight of this, silence fell onto the room. Setsuna was always in control. She was never worried or afraid. If this man was someone who could upset her, then the Senshi might have a serious problem.P<br>

> When she noticed the silence, Setsuna looked over the girls and focused on Luna. "You know who it is, don't you?"P<br>

> "Saturn Knight..."P<br>

> The Guardian of Time nodded. "Yes. Saturn Knight."P<br>

> Artemis looked horrified and smacked his own head. "Saturn Knight! Of course. How could I have forgotten. Yes, it's definitely Saturn Knight... Oh no."P<br>

> Setsuna raised an eyebrow at that. Now that the cards were out on the table and she had no more unexpected surprises, she was much calmer. "We have Saturn Knight wandering around and you can think of something else to say 'oh no' about?"P<br>

> "He has the Silence Glaive."P<br>

> The three people who realised the implications of that statement went white. Actually Artemis was always white, and since Luna was a black cat, she just 'went white' in an implied sense. Setsuna did actually go white. She recovered with admirable speed and aplomb, but it was yet another sign to the Senshi that all of their mentors were worried.P<br>

> Searching the faces of the three people discussing her suitor, Rei demanded answers. "Back a step! Who is Saturn Knight, and why is it so bad if he has the Silence Glaive?"P<br>

> "Saturn Knight was someone we all knew in the Moon Kingdom." Luna began. "I expect your memories will start to return over time now that they have been prompted, but that's not particularly necessary. If Endymion was not engaged to Sailor Moon - which made him 'Prince' - he would have been known as 'Earth Knight' since he was from Earth, and he was one of their leaders. Similarly, if Sailor Venus had a husband; he would have been called Venus Knight. Hence we have Saturn Knight. We all like to think of the Moon Kingdom as being a paradise. Somewhere that nothing ever went wrong. Somewhere ideal. Saturn Knight was exception."P<br>

> Amid the curious and confused looks, Artemis picked up the story.P<br>

> "If you ask me, Saturn Knight was a borderline psychotic, and a danger to everyone around him. The only people he cared about was Sailor Saturn and Queen Serenity. Even then, the Queen was his second loyalty. The man was a harmful presence and a threat to society. He was mentally unbalanced and delusional."P<br>

> "Then why couldn't Queen Serenity cast a healing on him. Surely she could make him better."P<br>

> Setsuna gave a short laugh. "She did. After the healing he was a borderline case, close enough to normal that people actually questioned whether he was sane or not. Before the healing there was no question at all. The man actually threatened to kill me once."P<br>

> "WHAT?"PP<br>

> "Oh yes. He and I never got along. I think he saw me as some kind of threat. I know I saw him that way. Imagine letting a paranoid with tendencies to violence be the closest advisor of the strongest and most hair triggered Senshi. Sailor Saturn was the only person who understood him, the only one that really talked to him. The Queen held his loyalty since she supported him and Sailor Saturn, but even then she was rather wary of him. She treated him like a pampered pet tiger: calmly, nicely and with lots of respect. The reason he threatened to kill me was because he somehow got the idea that I was trying to create a rift between him and Sailor Saturn. He took great offence to it, and told me that if I ever tried to interfere with him again he would see me dead."P<br>

> "Were you trying to interfere?"P<br>

> "Yes."P<br>

> "Could he have killed you?"P<br>

> Setsuna laughed. "Not even on his strongest day. Saturn Knight was a brawler, a fighter. He had no real magic to speak of. He may have been the most skilled magician in the Moon Kingdom, but he did not even have the magic to light a candle. Despite the fact that he got into fights with almost all of the Senshi - attacking them at royal balls and the like - he never could do any real harm."P<br>

> Ami nodded. It made sense. If the man was powerful and crazy, surely something would have been done. If he was just a nuisance, he would be tolerated and treated as well as possible. "Does this mean that it wasn't Saturn Knight that cast the Dragon Slave?"P<br>

> "Perfectly correct. I may not tell you who cast it, but I can

assure you that it was not him."P<br>

> "Possibly Sailor Saturn then?"P<br>

> "No. Sailor Saturn has not awoken yet. She still slumbers, hidden deep in the subconscious of whoever she currently is. Also, Sailor Saturn's magic is quite distinctive. If she had cast the Dragon Slave, I would have known instantly."P<br>

> Rei was beginning to feel concerned. She had spent quite a while now, talking to Saturn Knight. Each time the Senshi were called to battle, he would seem to materialise. The would talk, sometimes joking, sometimes serious. Always he was so polite and perfect. She could tell by the way that he acted that he cared for her. He brought her small gifts of flowers, juice, small cakes or poetry. P<br>

> He might not be perfect, and they were both still hiding behind their masks or magic, but she felt her heart being drawn to him. Just being near him, she knew that he felt the same way. It was the way that he looked at her. It was the way he moved. It was all of the little things. There was no way that her lovely man could be the same person they were describing.P<br>

> "Don't you see? He's not the same person he was then. We've all changed since we were reincarnated. Why can't he? Believe me, this Saturn Knight would never do any of those things that you have described. He's nice, he's just like Tuxedo Kamen was when we first met him."P<br>

> Setsuna did not look convinced. Before she could open her mouth to raise further objection, Ami shifted the focus of the conversation slightly. Rei gave her an appreciative look. It is hard to accept it when people debase and insult someone you care for; unfortunately what they were saying was true, it just did not apply any more.P<br>

> "You seemed worried that Saturn Knight had the Silence Glaive. Why is that? Also, what is it?"P<br>

> Luna jumped onto a table and pointed out the distance between herself and the wall. "The Silence Glaive is Sailor Saturn's weapon. It's a magical pole arm about this long, a weapon of massive power and capabilities. No-one knows exactly where it came from or when it was made. All that is known about it's history is that one day Sailor Saturn arrived at one of the royal functions carrying it. She demonstrated it's power for the Queen once. I remember watching as an entire asteroid was boiled away into space. In many ways the Silence Glaive is just another example of how unbalanced Saturn Knight was. He was obsessed with the weapon. Every time he met the other Senshi, he would describe how great the weapon was. He would tell everyone how great it was, and then claim that he had made it. "It was another part of the fantasy world he lived in. He honestly believed that he had created it, when everyone knows that it takes a great and powerful magician to make even the weakest of magical items. "It was sad, really."P<br>

> Ami steered the conversation for a while, trying to elicit all of the information that she could about Saturn Knight, Sailor Saturn, or anything else that it seemed that Setsuna may not have been completely open about.P<br>

> They talked for over an hour, rehashing what they knew, and making sure that no-one missed any of the details. This was especially difficult since Usagi was beginning to get bored. Once she had verified that Mamoru was still her loyal and devoted boyfriend, and that there was no immediate and present danger to herself or her friends, her mind started to wander. For a while she considered sleeping but that would have earned her a cat in the lap. Luna would have claimed that she wanted to be patted, but Usagi knew that she would be making sure she stayed awake.P<br>

> As the next most entertaining alternative, Usagi decided it was time to tease Rei. Rei not only had Ranma, she also was apparently making some good moves on Saturn Knight. Now Rei had read out one page of the letter she had shown them... that means that there are two pages they have not heard. Some good gossip to be found there!P<br>

> Working her way around the room, Usagi spent gradually crept up on Rei. The letter was hanging loosely from her fingers, and Rei was concentrating intently on what was being said. Now her hands were just millimetres from their goal and no-one had noticed yet...P<br>

> Got it!P<br>

> Before Rei could rescue the pages, Usagi was dancing backwards out of her reach. Laughing in delight at her good fortune, she scanned the pages, looking for juicy bits.P<br>

> First page: dull, just that stuff she already read out.P<br>

> Second page: dull, something about the focusing of spell energies and alternate power sources. Hmm, 'Mars Fire Soul Bird' nice name, must be some sort of power up for the current 'Mars Fire Soul' attack that Sailor Mars used.P<br>

> Third page: jackpot. This was what she was after. Out loud she began to read, retreating across the room from the rapidly pursuing - and rather angry - Hino Rei.P<br>

> "Oh, I like this bit:p<br>center'What Earthly beauty distilled /br

>Than the single rose br

>Withering on the virgin thorn br

>That live, grows and dies br

>In single blessedness?'centerbr

> Oww!"p<br>

> That last part was not in the poem. That came about when - at the same time as Rei seized her letter - Usagi fell on her behind. As tended to be the case, it was the much abused Luna that took the brunt of the damage, Usagi escaping with not even a bruise on her dignity.P<br>

> Rei towered over the girl, shaking in anger. Her face was red, and her hands were tightly clenched. "That was a private letter, Usagi! If it had anything to do with the Senshi I would have read it out. But it didn't. It was between him and me. Private."P<br>

> Grabbing her jacket, Rei stormed out of the room, heading for the door. Usagi looked up at her retreating form, tear brimming at her eyes. She did not mean to hurt her, she only wanted to have some fun: these Senshi meetings could be so dull some times.P<br>

> "Rei-chan... please..."P<br>

> The brunette did not even turn her head or acknowledge her leaders words. Shrugging into the jacket, she opened the door and stepped outside into the night air. "Goodnight."P<br>

> The silence in the room was broken only by the sound of Usagi's timid crying. No-one made any move to scold her. Everyone could see that she knew she had crossed a line she should never have been anywhere near.P<br>

> Two days later Rei was still fuming slightly at Usagi. She had calmed down mostly, now it was a delayed indignation. Her feelings were more the sort of 'I don't believe she did that...' than 'I want to tear her lungs out and see how well she can talk then...'.P<br>

> Despite the size of Usagi's gaff, it was hard for Rei to stay angry. Not only was she the sort whose anger burned brightly and briefly, but there were other reasons. It can be difficult to be truly angry with someone who you had lain down your life to save.

Even harder still to be mad at someone who brought you back from the dead. Considering Usagi fill both of those categories, and she really did not mean any harm, Rei buried her anger.P<br>

> What helped bring her around were her friends. Everyone understood why Rei was upset; who would not be? It was the way that the other Senshi criticised Usagi's actions that made Rei realise what a minor issue it really was. P<br>

> Despite (or perhaps because of) their flirtatious and boy hungry natures, it was Makoto and Minako that had come down on the clumsy leader of the Sailor Senshi the hardest. Just listening to Makoto talk made Rei realise that she needed to patch things up with Usagi. Her own anger she could deal with; being the focus and reason for someone else's anger was another matter. She was a champion of love and justice, she should not be making people angry. As long as she stayed mad, so would her friends, and that was bad for everyone.P<br>

> That was the reason she had allowed herself to be talked into this trip with Makoto. She had agreed to go to one of the Martial Arts classes that Ranma taught. It was not as though the insensitive jerk could compete with the suave, sophisticated and charming Saturn Knight, but he was here and he was accessible.P<br>

> Most importantly, the trip from Makoto's to the dojo gave the two time to talk, time to air out all of the issues. Time to end the problems with Usagi. It did not take long to convince Makoto to forgive the girl, all of the Senshi were too close; they were friends as close as any group of girls could be... Other than Michiru and Haruka, but that was another matter.P<br>

> As they neared the dojo, Makoto pointed to her watch. "You'll like this, Rei-chan. Ranma has about half an hour left with the kids class before we begin."P<br>

> "What? Why did we come so early?"P<br>

> "Come on... Surely you have to realise just how cute Ranma is under that Chinese shirt he always wears. Just think of it: firm muscles moving under that perfect skin. Sometimes his Gi comes open, and you can see all the way down his perfect chest to those rock hard abdominals. Ohhh, it sends shivers down my back thinking about it."P<br>

> A look of scorn crossed her face. "Oh, please! I prefer my men to have a brain in their head, not just be some insensitive, idiot, jock with muscle in place of his brains."p<br>

> Makoto chuckled. "Just wait until you see him with those little kids. I bet it will change your opinion of him forever."P<br>

> When they arrived at the dojo, it was a struggle to get to the front of the crowd so that they could see Ranma. The entrance of the dojo was not very large, but it was currently required to fit almost forty mothers, some of which also had a pram or other infant child with them. Looking out onto the training floor, Rei could understand the number of parents: the class was packed.P<br>

> In the middle of the room, Ranma was demonstrating a basic throw for an enthusiastic group of children. The most amazing thing that caught Rei was not the large number of children that were present, but it was the way that he treated them. Ranma seemed to take the time to treat each of them as individuals, while simultaneously pitching his instruction to the whole class. Feeling a little envious of the attention the children were getting â€" not to mention upset at the fact that she had never had a teacher like this â€" Rei leaned over and whispered in Makoto's ear.P<br>

> "Wow, the dojo must be making a fortune with a class this large... and he does this what, three times a week?"P<br>

> Makoto gave her an odd look. "Not from what I hear. Miyama Sensei,

that's the dojo's owner, used to charge for the children's class, but I hear that Ranma asked him to stop. When Ranma started teaching here, they began an adult's class: it's the one we're going to. They charge for that, but since it was so successful, Ranma got permission to teach the children's class for free."P<br>

> Rei chewed on that for a while. She was no stranger to charity work " she was training to be a Shinto Priestess, a job that was not well known for it's massive pay " she just did not expect to see it in others. Least of all she expected to see it in an insensitive jerk like Ranma. So why would he be willing to do a children's class for free... unless...P<br>

> "Hey, Mako-chan? Do you remember a while back, Hotaru accidentally got Mamoru into some sort of trouble about Chibi-Usa?"P<br>

> "Yeah, apparently Hotaru thought Mamoru was interested in Chibi-Usa, you know, like that. Then she decided to do something about it. Without talking to anyone, or asking what Chibi-Usa or Mamoru thought, but she's just a kid, so she can make mistakes. Poor Mamoru though, being beaten up, then tossed into a garbage bin."P<br>

> "Eww, yuck! You don't think that's why Ranma does these classes for free do you? If he and Hotaru were on their own for a long time, then they might have had some sort of problem when they were younger. Maybe this is his way of trying to protect the little kids, the way he wished he was protected?"P<br>

> Makoto shook her head. "I think you're reading too much into this Rei-chan. Ranma just likes to teach. Besides, he's so good now, he must have been able to fight well when he was younger. Did you realise that Ranma was the one who beat up Mamoru?"P<br>

> "What? All by himself? I've seen Mamoru take on three or four guys at once. You've can't make me believe that someone like Ranma could possibly beat him by himself."P<br>

> They might have continued for longer, but the children's class had ended, and the adults were beginning to line up. Joining in, Rei prepared herself for some heavy exercise. 'Who knows?' she thought, 'I might actually learn something here.'P<br>

> After bowing to Ranma, they began their warm ups. Leaning over to Rei, Makoto whispered in her ear. "I think Ranma might be better than Mamoru, after all, I've fought against both of them, and I can't even hit Ranma."P<br>

> Class went well. Ranma showed no favourites, other than giving Makoto and Rei a short smile. For Ranma it was almost like going back in time. The last time he had taught classes like this was when he was in the Amazon village, or before that... before that was when he taught classes with Akane.P<br>

> Today's class was similar to the Amazon's since almost everyone in the class was female, but he was male, and that was how he remembered the idyllic days of teaching when he was young. Physically he was only a little younger than he was at the moment so that made little difference. What brought it all back was the little things. The sound of feet on wood, the way the dojo blocked the cooling breezes he was used to outside, the subtle echoes of voices inside a building.P<br>

> It was so easy to lose himself in the luxury of the past. Sometimes he would be helping someone, and he would turn slightly, and catch a glimpse of black hair. Even as his eyes brushed across the face, he could see the scowl, that slight lowering of the eyebrows as she frowned her impatience. Later it would be the way someone moved, some mistake he had seen before, and he would hear a voice call him 'idiot' as he fooled around trying to illustrate his point.P<br>



> Time passed in a daze, Ranma calling for a second round of sparring and to change partners. He could almost hear Akane laugh as she bowed to her partner and walked up to him from the side. "Care to spar with me, Ranma?"P<br>

> He deliberately turned his back on the girl with the black hair, knowing the sort of malleting the comment would get him; it had become almost a ritual with them, a friendly reminder of what it was like when the first met.P<br>

> "Sorry, I don't fight girls... Even a tomboy like you, Akane."P<br>

> Ranma tensed his shoulders slightly, waiting for the blow, but none came. Silence reigned, finally prompting him to turn around. Rei was there, eyes starting to brim slightly. "Rei-san? What's wrong? Are you OK?"P<br>

> "But... But you sparred with Mako-chan before. And you just fought that girl with the blue hair... Aren't I good enough? Is that it Ranma?"P<br>

> Ranma squeezed his eyes shut and scratched the back of his head under his pony tail. "Heh, heh. Sorry, Rei-san. I was thinking of someone else for a while. Sure. I'd love to spar with you."P<br>

> The fire in Rei's eyes returned, and she looked up into his eyes and poked him in the chest (hmm, nice firm chest this!). "Don't think you can go easy on me either, Ranma!"P<br>

> Ranma called for everyone to start fighting and walked into the middle of the room followed by Rei. "Course I'll go easy on you, Rei-san. I'm the best there is!"P<br>

> Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Rei sent two punches and a kick past him. Although her form was uneducated, she had the fighting experience of battling the evil that infested Tokyo to teach her the hardest lessons. Pleasantly surprised that his temple maiden was not a total stranger to fighting, Ranma tried to see how deliberately bored he could look while Rei attacked.P<br>

> It was a shame he did not have a book to read.P<br>

> Striking all of the time and never hitting can be very tiring.

After sparring with Ranma, Rei decided to rest herself against the wall and chat to one of the other girls there. Mako-chan was out on the floor trying her hand against a brown belt. Near the entrance stood a tall girl who had as much purple hair as Rei did black. She looked like she had just come in, and was now standing next to one of those ugly little statues. Probably supposed to scare away evil spirits. P<br>

> "Hi, I'm Rei. Are you new here too?"P<br>

> "I Shampoo. Here to get husband."P<br>

> "Humph! I think half the girls here are trying to get a husband. Honestly, I don't know what that see in that insensitive jerk."P<br>

> The girl called Shampoo snarled and brought her bonbori up to a ready position. "You no insult Shampoo husband or Shampoo teach Rude-Girl lesson!"P<br>

> Rei went white and she slowly looked between Shampoo, Ranma and back again. "He's... He's your husband?"P<br>

> The words caught in her mouth and barely made it out. 'He had a wife? All this time he's had a wife?' Not once had he mentioned having a wife. All those talks that have had, but yet he never mentioned his wife? How could he? How could he?P<br>

> The purple haired bimbo, the harridan that had surely entrapped him into marriage, the hussy in the short skirt, that stain upon humanity that made Rei see red was saying something else. Something about Amazon laws or some guff like that. Rei ignored it and tried to sort out who she would kill first; Ranma for deceiving her and leading her

on, or this bimbo for stealing her Ranma.P<br>

> She had just turned back to Shampoo with death in her eyes when she felt strong hands holding her from behind. In front of her she could make out Ranma being belted over the head by one of the brightly coloured bonbori. As Makoto's soothing words captured her attention in a way that her arms never could, Rei realised something. She realised that Ranma was there holding Shampoo away from her, and he had most definitely taken a blow that was meant for her.P<br>

> He was also shouting.P<br>

> "I've told you before Shampoo, I'm not your husband. I don't mind if you come here and watch, but you are not allowed to attack my students. Especially Rei-san!"P<br>

> Rei could hardly believe it when he turned his back on the still angry Shampoo and looked her in the face. All her anger seemed to drain out of her like the emptying of hot bath water. He reached out a hand for her cheek. Closer. Closer. He eventually stopped when his hand was only millimetres away. Rei could feel his body heat at that distance. Warm and inviting. P<br>

> Rei's big eyes shimmered as she looked up into his concerned face. "Are.. are you all right, Rei-san?"P<br>

> A nod. Just a small one. It moved her head and maybe - just maybe - she felt her cheek touch his palm. Before she could be sure of what she had felt, Ranma's hand was back behind his head, scratching under his pony tail.P<br>

> "Ha, s-sure you are! M-macho tomboy like you'd probably be able to take on the Amazon's all at once. Gee, talk about uncute!"P<br>

> This time Makoto fairly pushed her forward to attack rather than holding her back.P<br>

> Rei had thumped him on the head a good four or five times before he even began to retreat. Again it was not a retreat, more just a circling, placing his own body in the way of an angry Shampoo.P<br>

> "Shampoo think you Pervert Girl, like hitting Shampoo husband!"P<br>

> Everyone started yelling at once then. Makoto was trying to get Rei and Shampoo to calm down. She knew that she might be able to fight Shampoo... might. Rei would be turned into hamburger the instant Ranma stepped aside at this rate. Shampoo, Ranma and Rei had a three way yelling competition going. They were ignoring what each other was saying, but somehow they expected that sheer volume would make themselves understood.P<br>

> Cologne watched as the class finished with only one of the Sensei. The other, her son-in-law, was busy discussing the finer points of etiquette with Shampoo and some friends.P<br>

> Bouncing forward she keenly observed the way they behaved. Shaking her head, Cologne sighed: kids these days. Ranma spotted her movement and stopped shouting at the others, instead he locked gazes with Cologne and pointed a finger at her.P<br>

> "You! You can call off Shampoo, can't you? The Matriarch has the authority to arbitrate in situations like this."P<br>

> Noticing the new arrival, everyone else shut up. Whether it was fear, respect, or something else did not matter. Now the quintet was surrounded by silence, broken only by the sound of Ranma or Cologne speaking.P<br>

> "Of course I could. I am the Matriarch. I can make any decisions I like, and I have decided that you should follow our laws and marry Shampoo."P<br>

> "Feh! Is that all you can say? Do this, do that, marry Shampoo... You know, you sound like a little kid when you talk like that. Always telling people what to do, never listening to my side of the story.

Perhaps I should treat you like a kid, ne, Cologne-chan?"P<br>

> "If you were an Amazon, you would know to respect me. You would know better to try such a form of address with me... Although I can understand why you could confuse me for someone as young and beautiful as Shampoo."P<br>

> While everyone else collapsed in shock at that thought, Ranma forged on, swooning with the sugary sweet words. "Oh, Cologne-chan! Were you not a married woman, I might challenge you for marriage, since you are so close to my own age." P<br>

> Cologne chuckled. Son-In-Law had a sense of humour. Good. He would need it if he was to become a proper husband to Shampoo. "If I was three hundred years younger, I might take you up on that, but for now: Shampoo is your wife."P<br>

> "I'm sure you would try, Cologne-chan. I'm sure you would." Ranma pulled himself up to his full height and pointed an arm at Cologne. "I, Tendo Ranma, challenge you! I shall prove that I am a member of the Amazon tribe, and you shall no longer force Shampoo to marry me because of the fight that she lost!"P<br>

> Shampoo bounced up and down, clapping her hands. All that bouncing showed what a really, um, healthy and unrestrained girl she was. Cologne merely narrowed her eyes and stared at Ranma. Something nibbled at the back of her brain, saying that this was a bad idea. She crushed the thought as it started; there is no way that an upstart young male like this could pose any real threat to her.P<br>

> "Let me check: if you win, I no longer force Shampoo to marry you under the normal marriage laws. If I win, you marry Shampoo. To win, you'll fight me and prove that you really are an Amazon."P<br>

> Ranma nodded.P<br>

> "Any conditions on the fight?"p<br>

> Ranma nodded. "None of the following attacks: Breaking Point Technique, Perfect Shi Shi Hokodan or Perfect Moko Takabisha or Rising Dragon Defeat. I'll also give up the Saotome Forbidden Techniques."P<br>

> Cologne's mouth wanted to fall open and hit the floor. For a male to know those techniques was bad enough. For someone outside the village was a crime beyond measurement. No matter what happened with this lad, heads would roll when she returned to the village. She did not care whether he actually knew them or not, he should not even know the name. Not even Shampoo knew of the existence of some of those attacks, so secret were they.P<br>

> Nodding Cologne also understood the significance of all of the selected attacks - aside from the so called 'Saotome Forbidden Techniques' - all of them were fairly indiscriminate attacks of mass destruction. A careless attack could destroy homes or injure bystanders.P<br>

> As his head started to dip indicating his acceptance and readiness, Cologne struck. A quick swipe with her staff to his kneecaps and the challenge would be over in moments. She was close, very close. If he had been just a few moments longer in reacting, she would have stunned his leg and made him a cripple for the rest of the fight. A month or two of rest would have healed it, but by then he would be Shampoo's. As it was, he executed a back flip out of the way but Cologne still caught his leg in a solid hit.P<br>

> Ranma wobbled on his feet for a few moments, and it was long enough for Cologne to come in for another strike. Favouring his left leg, Ranma retreated. Both fighters swapped blows at an unbelievable rate. To the amazement of everyone present, Ranma and Cologne gave a demonstration of the best possible from Martial Arts and their most gruelling attacks. P<br>

> Makoto, Shampoo, Rei and the dojo's owner had rapidly retreated to the corner of the room for fear of becoming "collateral damage". Everyone involved was surprised at the combatants' abilities. Cologne looked like a harmless little old lady, dangerous only by the fact that her face was so hideous. Yet they could see her standing toe to toe with Ranma, doing a full speed Amakurigen attack for almost three minutes. <br>

> Ranma was an equal surprise. Shampoo and Cologne both knew that he could do the Chestnut Fist, but to be able to perform at this level was another matter. A man this good may even be considered a challenge to the Matriarch... and that was something that had not been contemplated in living memory. Even though the leader of the Musk was held in awe, he was a known variable and able to be brought back because they knew his weaknesses. Besides, familiarity breeds contempt. <br>

> Finishing their high speed attacks, Ranma and Cologne leapt out of the dojo, wordlessly giving each other sufficient time to recover from the immense drain upon their energy. Once outside, they again took up the battle, this time in a whirlwind of kicks and punches. <br>

> Such an attack could last of only so long before one of them began to tire. To all appearances it was Ranma that was losing this battle. Although he was good, Shampoo could see that her great grandmother's moves were just slightly more efficient. So it was that Ranma began his retreat, losing three small Ki balls at Cologne's feet to make her give ground. <br>

> In an instant she was after him, and the pair bounded out of sight of the dojo. From one roof to another they moved, each time they met they would throw a number of kicks, punches and small Ki attacks. <br>

> Roofs across the suburb suffered considerable damage as the pair wandered. TV aerials became makeshift swords, while tiles would become shuriken. Anything that protruded or caught their attention would become a temporary weapon. By the time they descended to the ground again, each of them had a number of small cuts and they were sweating profusely. <br>

> Looking around the small park that they had come to a halt in, Cologne admired the puffing Ranma. "Well done, Son-In-Law. I never expected that someone so young as you would be able to give me such a challenge. But now you shall witness some of the ultimate magical power of the Chinese Amazons! Behold, the Splitting Cat-Hairs!" <br>

> Cologne was glad to see the way that he flinched when she named that technique. Now she began to move, circling him. Knowing that he was safe from the Hiryou Shoten Ha, Ranma made no move. Shortly he was surrounded by afterimages of Cologne. All around him she moved, each image slightly blurred from her speed and the magic she used to create the after images. <br>

> Then she attacked. Seemingly from every side punches would come out, knocking him from all sides. Before she could finally fell him, Ranma leapt straight up into the air. <br>

> "You should have left it to normal attacks or Ki, Cologne-chan. There's no way that you can beat me using magic. ELEMENKIA LANCE!" <br>

> A beam of bright yellow light flew from his palm, crashing straight down into the middle of her illusionary circle. The Elemenkia Lance was a lethal attack spell, but he had aimed it at the ground, rather than Cologne. With an explosion; dust, dirt and grass were thrown into the air, knocking Cologne out of her expected path. If he had hit her with such a spell, they would have been picking bits of her

out of the trees.P<br>

> When he landed, Ranma allowed Cologne enough time to reclaim her staff and get back onto her feet. The blast had not really hurt her but it's unexpectedness had surprised her greatly. If she had felt him powering up for a Ki attack, she would have braced or dodged. Instead he had thrown a magic attack that was completely beyond her experience. P<br>

> Knowing that she was now at a disadvantage, Cologne backed towards the stream that ornamentally split the park. Releasing her own battle aura, Cologne threw a pair of powerful Ki attacks at him, forcing him to dodge and leap. What she had not expected was for him to then land and prepare his own Ki attack. With the amount of energy he had already expended, he should be near to exhaustion.P<br>

> Even as she could feel him focusing his Ki, Cologne saw her chance. Now he was stationary, a small blue ball beginning to form in his hands. If she struck now he could dodge and yield his attack, or stay and be hit. Firing off a small attack, she waited for him to dodge.P<br>

> Only, he did not dodge. He stayed where he was. As she fired her own attack, she saw the real result of his preparation. Ranma dumped all of the Ki he had been preparing internally into the ball in his hands. The glowing sphere went from tennis ball to larger than a beach ball in less time than it took Cologne's attack to cross the range. When her attack hit, it was simply absorbed and negated.P<br>

> Ranma locked eyes with Cologne and gave a brief chuckle as he saw fear flash across her face. "MOKO TAKABISHA!"P<br>

> With a roar the sphere shot over her head and she dropped to the ground. Even though it missed, she could feel the heat of it's passage. Distracted for a moment, she was unable to react as she suddenly felt Ranma's hands on her. P<br>

> As one arm crossed her throat like a bar of iron, another began to stress her elbow, preparing to break the joint in the most painful manner possible. Just as she realised that he was only just applying the strangle and arm bar, she heard his words whisper in her ear.P<br>

> "You're a hundred years too soon to beat me, Cologne-chan."P<br>

> A shock went through her system and all of the pieces fell into place:The fight in a small clearing surrounded by trees, with a small stream to one side.p<br>

> The name Cologne-chan.p<br> That cocky attitude, but always careful and caring.p

> The strangle and pain hold.p<br>

> Finally those words. Words spoken to her three hundred years ago by a cocky young man as he defeated her challenge for marriage. Blinking back tears, Cologne rolled onto her back and looked up into the concerned face that hovered only inches from hers. Fear, excitement and amazement barely let her get the word past her lips. A word that was a name. A name she had never expected to say again.P<br>

> "Soap..."P<br>

> Ranma held her to him so tightly she feared her ribs might crack. "Cologne-chan... Oh, God I've missed you!"P<br>

> Makoto looked at her watch again. She could hardly believe that two people could fight each other that long. It had been almost an hour since the three girls lost track of them and returned to the dojo. From her position seated on the steps into the dojo, Makoto could see Rei nervously pacing as she waited for Ranma's return.P<br>

> Shampoo just stood there. Although she projected an aura of confidence, she knew the other girls could tell she was troubled.

Shampoo knew that no-one should have given her great-grandmother so much difficulty. Any boy that she attacked should have fallen in moments. No-one should have been able to keep her occupied for this long, no matter what they did.P<br>

> Rei made no secret of hiding her worry. She could not believe it. That insensitive jerk had reached a new all time low. Picking on old women! How bad can you get. Rei spun on her heel and flicked a glance at Shampoo. 'Grrr, it was all her fault. I hope Ranma's all right.'P<br>

> The sound of voices and laughter brought their attention back to the present quickly. Stepping past the corner of a building came the most amazing sight. Ranma was running along with both hands outstretched making aeroplane noises. Sitting on his head, staff across her lap, was Cologne. What was strangest of all was that Ranma held an ice cream cone in each hand.P<br>

> Skidding to a stop in front of the shocked women they both smiled. While licking his own ice cream, he held the other up for Cologne to take a lick. The silence was perfect.P<br>

> Shampoo put a hand to her mouth and gasped. "Oh no! Great Grandmother already use Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu technique to make husband into her slave!"P<br>

> After savouring the silence for a moment, Ranma finally moved their ice creams away. "I think you have something to say... Don't you, Cologne-chan?"P<br>

> Cologne cleared her throat and looked down at Shampoo. Hmm, good view from up here. Maybe I should get someone to do this for me more often. "Yes... Yes I do. Shampoo, I am afraid to say that this boy has proven his claim to be an Amazon to my satisfaction. I am afraid that you current claim against him for marriage is therefore invalid. At his request, I hereby nullify your claim on this man."P<br>

> Rei and Makoto looked like they were in heaven, while Shampoo's heart shattered. She had only known him for a while, but he was perfect. If there was ever a better man, she did not know how to find him. Twin tracks appeared on her face as silent tears began to drop.P<br>

> "Since I am the Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku, and this man has been without a wife for so long... Shampoo, I hear by appoint you to be his new bride. Under my authority, you must do everything possible to bring this man back to our village as your husband."P<br>

> The moment of stunned silence was all she needed. Leaping off his head, she knocked the remainder of the ice creams into Ranma face. Taking Shampoo's hand they sprinted off between the buildings. "Ha, Ha! I shall see you wed yet, Soap Onna Rope!"P<br>

>-----br<br>End Of Chapter

## 21. A Friend In Need Is A Friend Indeed

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<br>This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the current

>author.<br>

>Thanks to my pre-readers:<br>Ben

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><br>This is a crossover between Ranma 1/2 and Sailor Moon. To make the two

>stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates  
at <br>which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor  
Moon. I bow  
>my head in shame: please forgive.<br>  
>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to its  
<br>story timeline...  
><br>This story is dedicated to the letter K and the numbers 4 and 5.

><br>  
>Visit my website at<br>dzillman@ozemail.com.au

>http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire  
> \_\_\_\_\_<br> / \  
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \ \_\_\_\_\_/  
><br>  
><br>What has gone before:  
>While on a training trip with his father during the early 1600s,  
Ranma <br>fell into the spring of the drowned young girl.  
Unfortunately, his  
>curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he  
<br>has spent most of his time in his cursed form. Not only that, but

>because the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year  
old <br>girl who never ages.  
><br>In the present...  
>Ranma has received a partial cure for his curse by the spirit entity  
<br>called Mistress 9. She will eventually take his girl's body,  
freeing  
>him entirely, so now he poses as Tomoe Hotaru. Unfortunately, he now  
<br>seems to have a few problems with the ladies, since he is  
inadvertently  
>engaged to Hino Rei (he's taking lessons in Shinto), his old buddy  
<br>Ucchan, and the friendly Amazon Shampoo. That doesn't even start  
to  
>include Mako-chan, or the fact that two of his best friends are only  
<br>three foot tall: Cologne and Chibi-Usa.  
><br>Ranma has just finished teaching a Martial Arts class with  
Makoto and  
>Rei in it...<br>  
>-----<br>A Friend In Need Is A Friend  
Indeed  
>-----<br>  
>Having safely taken Makoto home, Ranma and Rei were working their  
way <br>to Rei's house. Following the afternoon's Martial Arts class,  
Ranma had  
>been delayed by a hour or two battling with Cologne. When you added  
<br>into that the time it took for them to talk afterwards and then  
walk  
>Makoto home, evening was beginning to make itself felt. <br>  
>It was rather a nice night to be walking out romantically, perfect  
for <br>lovers wearing jackets to hold hands, or for the bolder ones  
to share  
>their body heat. The air was crisp and clean; the chill evening  
breeze <br>had managed to clear out most of the pollution, leaving a  
golden sunset  
>and an almost cloudless evening.<br>  
>Needless to say, on such a perfect night for lovers' close comfort,  
Rei <br>found herself walking at a distance from Ranma, wondering how  
he could  
>look so warm and comfortable in weather like this. Sighing to

herself, <br>she rubbed her hands up and down her biceps, trying to warm herself.

>'Idiot, he didn't even look my way.'  
<br>

>Rei sighed again (a little louder to see if that would work), and  
<br>wished she was walking with Saturn Knight instead of Ranma. At least

>Saturn Knight was a gentleman. He also had a nice, big, warm cloak,  
<br>just perfect for two.

><br>"Are you cold, Ranma?"

><br>"Nope. Try meditating naked on a mountain top in winter in Tibet..."

>\_That's\_ cold."  
<br>

>Silence. Just the sound of some tacky TV program in the background as  
<br>they passed someone's house. 'What's wrong with the idiot this time? He

>hasn't even looked at me or said a thing since we left

Mako-chan's?'  
<br>

>A car passed them in the near darkness. Surely that chill breeze would  
<br>be enough to awaken even Ranma's sense of gallantry.

><br>Two minutes later, Rei looked over and made a pronouncement. All due

>credit must be given here to Ranma as both a human being and a male in  
<br>the presence of a pretty girl. His oh-so-powerful talents of

>observation and sensitivity did not need anything more than 'Ranma,  
<br>I've been freezing here for the last ten minutes! I don't suppose you

>have a spare jacket?' and he instantly responded. Does Ranma win the  
<br>award for Sensitive-New-Age-Guy-Of-The-Year?

><br>'Damn. Here I've been keeping myself warm with Ki, and poor little Rei-

>san's been shivering. There's got to be some way that I can get her to  
<br>warm up, 'cause I think the pack's pretty empty.'

><br>With a look of chagrin on his face, Ranma shrugged and held up a small

>bundle of clothes. "Sorry, Rei-san. All I have is these clothes for  
<br>Hotaru. I don't think any of them would fit you... What with her petite

>and girlie figure, and you having thighs that are too thick, and  
<br>strength of a gorilla. I mean, even the shirt would be too loose on a

>flat chested girl like you."  
<br>

>While he waited for her inevitable anger, Ranma counted his (few)  
<br>blessings. At least he was walking on such a pretty night with Rei-san

>and not Sailor Mars. Poor Sailor Mars would have frozen ages ago in  
<br>such a short skirt. There would have been him with a nice warm cloak

>around him, staring at a Sailor Mars Popsicle: he would have felt so  
<br>dumb.

><br>Her first impulse was to reel back and slap him across the face, then

>she remembered who she was being compared to. Hotaru-chan. Ranma's  
<br>little sister. The little girl who - according to Chibi-Usa and Ukyo -

>had some sort of growth problem. Unless her treatment work, Hotaru may  
<br>never fully bloom into the statuesque lady she no doubt wanted to be.

>Poor Ranma must be used to making comments like that to help bolster



<br>her ego.  
><br>Reining in her anger, Rei resolved not to hit him for that comment. Of  
>course, there were other, much more fulfilling ways to get even without <br>resorting to physical violence. Like asking about that Amazon 'wife' of  
>his, for example.<br>  
>After a moment of silence Ranma turned worriedly and looked at Rei. For <br>a while there he was concerned that someone may have kidnapped Rei-san,  
>'Why wasn't she reacting to his insult the way she used to? Surely  
<br>nothing could have kept her from retorting back for this long.'

>However, she was still there. Good thing too, after all, who'd want to <br>kidnap a tomboy like her?  
><br>The he noticed her smile and his blood ran cold. No-one should smile  
>like that. Sharks smile like that. Vipers smile like that. Primary  
<br>school teaches smile like that when they are about to give a failing  
>report card to the rowdiest student in the class. Ranma shuddered. Rei-<br>san should never smile like that.  
><br>"So, Ranma, tell me about this wife of yours."  
><br>Ranma's eyes unfocused and he moved forward on autopilot. In front of  
>him was a vision of beauty. She had short hair and the biggest, deepest <br>brown eyes you could ever see. A slightly dazed smile crossed his face  
>as he lost himself in her image.<br>  
>"Hmm, let me see. About your height and a great martial artist... Real <br>tomboy type; you'd like her."  
><br>Bonk!  
><br>"I suppose you could say it was an arranged marriage. The parents  
>wanted it, neither of us wanted it initially, but well. I guess she  
<br>grew on me."  
><br>That surprised her. The way he treated Shampoo made Rei think he was  
>more interested in getting out of the marriage than thinking about her <br>as a real wife. "Actually, I mean as a person. It's not as though I got  
>to know her, I've never really had a chance to talk to her."<br>

>Ranma shrugged. "Um... Let see... She's smart, really smart. Smarter  
<br>than I'll ever be, we both studied together when we were young, and she  
>was always better than me, not as good as her sister, but still smart. <br>"She's good looking too. Much nicer than you in fact. And a better  
>dresser too. I suppose it didn't hurt that her family was rich."<br>

>By this stage, Rei was really fuming, and searching around for  
<br>something nice and heavy to hit him over the head with. Something  
>useful like a bokken or a large mallet.<br>  
>Ranma stopped in his tracks and nervously scratched under his ponytail. <br>"Oops. Sorry about that. Got confused there for a moment. That was how  
>pop told me about him choosing my mum. Heh, heh. You know, I think he  
<br>once told me that the girl he was with hit him over the head

with a  
>bokken for that."<br>  
>Spinning on his toes Ranma looked closely at Rei. "You'd never do that <br>sort of thing would you, Rei-san?"  
><br>"N-no. No, of course not!"  
><br>He turned away and started walking again. Somehow Rei thought he  
  
>sounded disappointed, but that would have to be her imagination acting <br>up. "No... I don't suppose you would."  
><br>"Actually, beautiful is hardly the right word for her. You just can't  
>describe what she looked like. I thought she was a goddess really...  
<br>How would I describe her? I'd have to say... perfect. She was simply  
>perfect in every way."<br>  
>Rei could feel her heart crumble into dust with every word. Chibi-Usa <br>was right, Ranma did love someone else. Gods, he loved Shampoo so much,  
>that even though they had been apart for only a couple of hours he was <br>already speaking about her in the past tense.  
><br>"So, when is the wedding?"  
><br>"Huh? What wedding?"  
><br>"To Shampoo. You were just saying how perfect she was."  
  
><br>"What? What's Shampoo got to do with this? I was talking about my  
>wife."<br>  
>It amazing what a little hope can do. As soon as the word 'What?' came <br>out of his mouth, Rei could tell he was sincerely confused. Shampoo was  
>definitely not the girl he was referring to. But as with all <br>situations, the further you rise, the further you fall. Her broken  
>heart had started to mend when she realised that he was not talking <br>about Shampoo... then he flat out admitted that he did have a wife. He  
>took the tiny shards of her shattered heart and ground them under his <br>heel.  
><br>You cannot trust men.  
><br>"Akane."  
><br>Akane? Akane who? She'd never heard of anyone called Akane. Who was  
>this Akane? Some bimbo he had picked up in his travels no doubt.  
<br>  
>Slowly she forced out the words. It was like trying to recite bad <br>poetry; you knew how much it would hurt to say it, but you needed to do  
>it anyway.<br>  
>"How... How long have you been married?"<br>  
>Silence.<br>  
>More silence.<br>  
>Silence broken only by the sound of their feet on the concrete.<br>  
  
>"I think Akane died about three hundred and fifty years ago. I've <br>suffered every day since."  
><br>She's dead? Akane's dead? Let's see...350 days, that's almost a year.  
>"I'm sorry, Ranma. I didn't realise."<br>  
>He gave a wry chuckle. "How could you? The only people who know are <br>Cologne-chan and Shampoo. Oh, and you too."

><br>Reaching slowly she placed a hand on his arm. "Did Hotaru know her?"

><br>"She loved Akane every bit as much as I did. Akane loved Hotaru the

>same as she loved me, too. I... It's been hard since she died."<br>

>They walked in silence for a while. Each wrapped in their own thoughts. <br>For Ranma, it was Akane. Oddly enough, it was the same for Rei.

><br>'350 days? But that was more recently than he got engaged to Ukyo. So

>he did actually say years... Which means... Which means that he doesn't <br>want to tell me when she died... Which means... What does that mean?'

><br>Seeking a safer topic, Rei thought back to his battle with the

>desiccated old mummy. Not only had she never seen anyone fight as well <br>as the two of them did, she could not believe the incredible speed that

>some of their attacks had used. Especially that time they started <br>screaming about Roasted Chestnuts... that was simply amazing.

><br>Rei did not know if she had the Martial Arts ability for the job, but

>she could not help thinking about how well Makoto could do if she <br>learned it. The mighty Sailor Jupiter using the Chestnut Fist: the

>ultimate combination of magic and martial prowess. No threat to the <br>Princess would ever get through!

><br>"Hey Ranma... What were those strange attacks you were doing against

>the old ghoul? You were both punching so fast I couldn't even see your <br>arms move."

><br>"Ahhh... That was the dreaded 'Roasting Chestnuts Over An Open Fire'.

>It is a secret technique of the Joketsuzoku Amazons, passed down <br>through 2700, no, 3000 years of their heritage. The legendary speed of

>this technique has held Chinese Emperors in awe since its creation!"<br>

>Ranma turned and gave her a cheeky smile. "See, I remembered the sales <br>pitch on the technique just like Deodorant taught me!"

><br>Rei had to laugh. Here was Ranma, the one person she knew who did not

>seem to be able to take anything seriously, and he was quoting word-<br>for-word the standard brag line for a Martial Arts technique. "So, do

>you think you can teach Mako-chan and I how to do it?"<br>

>"Maybe... Then again, maybe not. Mako-chan might be able to learn it; <br>she's pretty good. If she just showed a little more dedication to

>fighting, then she could have a lot of promise. You on the other <br>hand... The Chestnut Fist is all about speed and a slow-poke tomboy

>like you just doesn't have the speed for it. Besides, you're a temple <br>maiden Rei-san. What would you need to know a technique like that for?"

><br>She was stunned. Once again he had managed to insult her in the

same

>breath that he praised some other girl. The man must have a death wish. <br>Not only that, but he thought Makoto was not dedicated to fighting?

>This girl was not only a Sailor Senshi (which he did not know, but that <br>was beside the point), she also had been thrown out of almost every

>school she had been to for being too violent and fighting all of the <br>time.

><br>"So, you could teach Mako-chan?"

><br>"Nope."

><br>"But you said..."

><br>"But I said she might be able to learn it. I didn't say I could teach

>it. Let's face it Rei-san, you and Mako-chan aren't exactly the best <br>friends of Shampoo and Cologne-chan. I once promised Deodorant - the

>woman who taught me. I promised her that I would never teach these <br>attacks to people who might attack or hurt the Amazons."

><br>The silence held for a while, each holding their own counsel. Ranma was

>thinking that if he could find the Pretty Soldier Sailor Mars, he could <br>teach her the attack. She did not even know Shampoo, and she certainly

>had both the speed and the fighting spirit needed. On the other hand, <br>Rei was wondering how she could 'accidentally' get Sailor Mars to bump

>into Ranma and learn the attack that way. Surely the Sailor Senshi were <br>everybody's friends.

><br>"You know, Ranma, I hate to be the one to point it out, but those

>Amazons have got really stupid names. What sort of person calls their <br>kids Cologne, Deodorant, or Shampoo? It's just silly. Not only that,

>but the way you call the old ghoul 'Cologne-chan'... it makes me sick. <br>Ewww, how can you flirt with someone as old and mean and ugly as that?"

><br>Ranma smirked. "Hey, you try telling a village full of elite Amazon

>warriors that their names are silly and see how far you get.

Besides, I <br>think there's actually some sort of significance to them... um,

>somehow.<br>"As for Cologne-chan... you see a withered old woman. I look at her and

>see a beautiful young girl about your age. Someone bright, talented, <br>caring and friendly."

><br>"Blargh! You're making me sick. Why don't you just marry her?"

><br>"Well, she did ask me when I was in their village last, but I was still

>grieving for Akane."<br>

>"Hmm, were all of those special attacks you mentioned from the <br>Amazons?"

><br>"Just about."

><br>"Well, what about the 'Saiotome Forbidden Techniques'? That doesn't

>sound like an Amazon name. Could you teach us them?"<br>

>"I could teach them if you were good enough - which you're not.

<br>Actually, I'd like to be able to teach them to you someday, but I

can't  
>now."<br>  
>"Why not? Does someone else hold your oath on these too?"<br>  
  
>"Yeah. My father actually. The mighty Saotome Genma. He invented a set <br>of techniques so powerful and so deadly that he ordered them to be  
>sealed away from the world, never to be used other than in my darkest <br>hour."  
><br>Ranma remembered the day well. Genma panda was there, sitting in a  
>small stream, holding a sign: 'Only teach these techniques to your <br>wife, Boy. They are too dangerous for others to know.'

><br>Ranma sighed. He had not thought about his father in a long time. Stupid  
>old man, always stealing my food.<br>  
>"You father was a PANDA?!"<br>  
>"Um... only half the time..."<br>  
>"What?!"<br>  
>"Do you believe in magic Rei-san? Well, when I was young, my father got <br>cursed. It was this place in China called Jusenkyo. Up until the day he  
>died he turned into a panda when he got doused with cold water."<br>  
  
>"You're kidding... right?"<br>  
>"No. Ask Cologne-chan about the Jusenkyo springs sometime. I... I don't <br>like to talk about them. They caused Akane a lot of suffering until the  
>day she died."<br>  
>They were at the steps to enter the Hikawa Shrine when Ranma spoke <br>again. "Her name was Tendo Akane, that's why I'm called Tendo Ranma,  
>not Saotome Ranma. It was always hoped that the two of us would be <br>able to take over the Tendo School Of Anything Goes Martial Arts. The  
>Tendo Dojo was known throughout Japan at one time, but, now... no-one's <br>even heard of Anything Goes."  
><br>"I remember... I remember once a delegate from the Shogun actually came  
>to the dojo, officially asking that one Tendo Soun ensured that his <br>daughter was properly married so that the School could continue."

><br>Rei paused from taking off her shoes and looked up at him. Ranma had  
>already kicked off the soft soled slippers that he favoured, and was <br>looking wistfully into the distance. "Shogun? When did that happen?"  
><br>"Hmm, let's see. That would have been the late 1500's... Somewhere  
>around there I think."<br>  
>"Wow you really know your family history!"<br>  
>"I know it so well, it feels like it actually happened to me <br>personally."  
><br>"Pretty impressive, especially considering that it was your wife's  
>family, not your own."<br>  
>"Not really. You see, the Saotome School of Anything Goes Martial Arts <br>has been in existence for centuries too. Seriously, both the Schools

>have been really close since they began. The first marriage happened  
<br>around the middle of the 1500's. Pretty impressive, ne?"

><br>"Ohhhh! So you're the product of 400 years of inbreeding!"

><br>"Yep, that's me, 400 years of... Hey! Come back here!"

><br>Ranma chased Rei through the shrine for several minutes until  
Rei

>literally ran into her grandfather. The wizened old man's face broke  
<br>into a smile as he took hold of his charge's shoulders. "It is a  
sight

>to gladden these old eyes to see you so happy with your fiancée,  
Rei-<br>chan."

><br>"WHAT?! Who could be happy with this insensitive idiot around?"

>"WHAT?! Who could be happy with this macho tomboy around?"<br>

>"What did you call me?" Rei advanced a step in his direction.<br>

>"Ahh, so the tomboy rears her ugly head after all."<br>

>"Ohhh, you... \_Boy\_!"<br>

>Grabbing her broom, an irate Rei chased after Ranma. Around and  
around <br>they ran, her constantly swiping at him, and him  
alternately taunting

>her or covering his head and shouting 'Ouch!'.<br>

>Of course, not everyone's relationship was that unsteady... or that  
<br>violent. Mind you, they were not they only ones to be having a

>disagreement that evening. Of all the couples that were having  
<br>arguments that evening, one stands above the rest. Their argument  
was

>not one of hatred or opposition. Instead, it was an argument that  
<br>stemmed from the greatness of their love.

><br>The couple - who shall remain nameless to preserve the dignity,  
and

>also to add a little suspense into this story - were sitting in a  
pile <br>of cushions in the corner of a large room. Why cushions, you  
ask? The

>room itself was beautifully fitted out, certainly there was no  
shortage <br>of comfortable chairs in the room, or even the house, so  
that obviously

>had no bearing on why they were sitting on a pile of cushions.<br>

>It could have had something to with the injuries both of them had  
<br>suffered recently. Without doubt, one of them had been thoroughly

>knocked around with a large stone block. For most people that would  
be <br>enough to hospitalise them. Perhaps that was why they were  
there...

>medicinal reasons, so to speak. However, a close examination would  
show <br>that neither of these people was significantly injured.  
Certainly there

>were none of the broken ribs or other bones that could have been  
<br>expected.

><br>Equally, neither of them seemed to be suffering for the sucking  
chest

>wounds that may have been expected from someone that had either been  
<br>struck multiple times by arrows, or shot in the chest by a large  
gun.

>In each of their cases, both had been struck by several arrows, but  
<br>neither of them showed a single scar.  
><br>Ah, but as it turns out, it is this unique phenomena of love  
that is  
>responsible for their position. How so? You ask. To explain that, I  
<br>shall pick two names - completely at random - and assign them to  
the  
>two people. Call the tall, handsome one Haruka. Call the shorter but  
<br>strikingly beautiful one Michiru. Remember, these names are  
chosen  
>completely at random, so there's no chance that they match their  
real <br>names... right?  
><br>Haruka placed her hand on Michiru's shoulder and traced the line  
down,  
>mentally connecting the places where arrows had struck her. Even  
though <br>Michiru was wearing a blouse, she could feel the  
smoothness of her  
>skin, feel it's gentle warmth. The skin under her hand was perfect,  
<br>unmarred by any scarring. Eventually Haruka's hand drifted over  
her  
>friend's heart and stayed there. <br>  
>In the silence of the room, she could feel and hear Michiru's heart  
<br>beat. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Even and regular. A sound  
reassuring in  
>it's monotony. A sound that said: 'I am Michiru's heart, and I shall  
<br>beat like this forever.'  
><br>But it would not beat forever. Haruka knew that only too well.  
Looking  
>into her blue eyes, Haruka savoured the reassuring movement under  
her <br>fingers. Sensing her partner's quite distress, Michiru placed  
her own  
>hands over Haruka's and held her palm to her chest. <br>  
>"See, it's still there. Now that we have the Talismans, I will never  
<br>let it stop. My heart shall keep beating here, next to you, as  
long as  
>we shall live."<br>  
>Haruka blinked her eyes, trying to hold back tears. She knew her  
<br>reputation, she was supposed to be the tough one, the one that  
was  
>always flirting with other girls. She was not supposed to be  
vulnerable <br>like this. But she felt vulnerable... very vulnerable.  
She edged closer  
>to Michiru and placed her other arm around her shoulders. <br>  
>"I know you're here now, but I thought I had lost you. I watched you  
<br>walking towards me, with all of those arrows in you, and I know  
you  
>were going to die. I... It was the worst experience of my life. I  
don't <br>want to think what it would be like if you had died and I  
had lived."  
><br>Michiru leaned forward and placed a small kiss on the other  
girl's  
>forehead. "But I am here. And I'm going to stay here, by your side,  
for <br>as long as you need me."  
><br>"I'll always need you."  
><br>Silence hung in the air for a moment. Michiru spoke again. "I  
remember  
>lying there. Eudial had taken the Talisman from me, and all I could  
do <br>was lie there, watching you. Watching your face as you  
realised what  
>had happened. Then she told you that you had a Talisman too.

<br>"Your face lit up, do you realise that? Even as you knew that it would  
>kill you, I could tell you were happy. That hurt me more than the  
<br>arrows or Witch Eudial's Heart Buster Gun. I knew that you were going  
>to die too and there was nothing I could do to stop it. That hurt."<br>  
>"Living without you would hardly be living at all. I never wanted to  
<br>hurt you. I just wanted to be together. Afterwards. After we died... I  
>didn't know what would happen, but I hoped that it would happen to  
<br>us... together."  
><br>Michiru blushed slightly and looked at their intertwined hands for a  
>few moments. Forcing some levity into her voice she asked: "So the  
<br>magnificent Sailor Uranus is a romantic after all."  
><br>"Only for you."  
><br>"Oh, that poor little Usagi-chan that you keep flirting with, she'll be  
>heartbroken."<br>  
>"Poor little Usagi-chan can be whatever she likes. It's you that  
<br>matters. Without you, there is no point in being Sailor Uranus. Why  
>fight to protect something if everything that needs protecting is gone? <br>The only thing that felt better than knowing I would join you when you  
>died was when we were brought back. Then I could feel you beside me,  
<br>and nothing feels better than that."  
><br>Big blue eyes locked with green. "And what of the Talisman? What about  
>finding the Holy Grail? We were willing to sacrifice someone else's  
<br>life, how can we be any different?"  
><br>Haruka thought back to all of the times that they had fought both  
>Daimons, Witches and the Inner Senshi for the sake of a Heart Crystal. <br>They could hardly say that their hands were clean. How could she  
>justify taking someone else's life, when she felt this way about  
<br>Michiru?  
><br>"We aren't different. We are just the same as all of the other people  
>out there. I would risk my life any day to get the Talisman, or  
<br>whatever else was needed. I would give my life and any other life that  
>was needed to keep you alive. But I would never offer your life.  
<br>Everything has a price, and that price is too high."  
>"Some things I cannot do."<br>  
>She did not say anything, but a faint smile crossed Michiru's face as <br>she moved closer to Haruka. Leaning against the taller girl, they both  
>drew strength from each other. <br>  
>Time, as it is wont to do, moved forward. After they had sat like that <br>for a time, Haruka looked down at her friend and broached the subject  
>that neither wanted to discuss. The future.<br>  
>"Do you think we've stopped them now that we have the Grail?"<br>  
  
>Michiru shook her head. With her leaning into the crook of Haruka's  
<br>elbow, that felt quite nice. "No. We still don't even know what they



>were really after. There's no way that they will stop with one failure <br>to get the Grail. Just look at how many times they tried and failed to  
>get the Talismans."<br>  
>"Do you think Usagi-chan is in danger?"<br>  
>Granted, their enemies probably knew that Sailor Moon had the Grail.  
<br>They might not know that Usagi was really Sailor Moon, but then again  
>they may. <br>  
>"Yes."<br>  
>"We could protect her, couldn't we. We could stop them from ever  
<br>getting to her."  
><br>"True."  
><br>"And if we did that, we would never know who was really behind their  
>attacks. We would never see the person that was pulling the strings. We  
<br>would never be able to go after our true enemy."  
><br>"Also true."  
><br>"They're stronger than the Inner Senshi. They way that they have been  
>fighting, the Inners will be lucky if they can keep winning the battles  
<br>without our help."  
><br>"Very true."  
><br>"I'd say it's pretty likely that the Witches 5 also know this. That  
>means that Usagi-chan and her friends will be in danger."<br>

>Nod. Haruka liked it when Michiru nodded. It sent shivers down her  
<br>spine... and some other places.  
><br>"If we let them get attacked, they would probably get hurt, but

>eventually, it will lead us back to whoever is controlling them. As  
<br>much as I hate to say something bad about Chibi-Usa's little friend, I  
>would be willing to lay money that Hotaru is involved some how."<br>

>Another nod.<br>  
>Haruka looked down at the smiling face of her friend. A friend that  
<br>obviously knew the effect she was having on the woman holding her.  
>Haruka placed a finger on the tip of Michiru's nose.<br>  
>"You know, I really hate it how you're always disagreeing with me."<br>  
>Michiru nodded several times.<br>  
>Yesterday they had confronted Witch Eudial and had discovered that they  
<br>were the holders of two of the Talismans. Yesterday they had given  
>their lives for the Earth, died to do what needed doing. <br>

>Today, there was just the two of them. The world could save itself for  
<br>one night.

><br>\* \* \*

><br>In a dimly lit room of the Tomoe household, plans were being made.

>Plans that would inevitably draw the magnificent Sailor Uranus and the  
<br>elegant Sailor Neptune back into the conflict.

><br>A tall, elegant, and refined looking woman sat on a large square throne

>in the middle of the room. Like the rest of the room, she was cast in  
<br>darkness, the shadows clinging to her like a second skin. Even

though

>the edges of the room faded into darkness, there was still a feeling of  
<br>closeness to the room. Possibly it was just the strength of  
her

>presence that filled the room, making her the centre of attention  
for <br>everyone else.

><br>The woman who sat on the throne was Mistress 9 and from the  
darkness,

>she looked down onto her servant, Tomoe Souichi. Despite the way the  
<br>shadows covered her head and hid her features, you could see the

>occasional reflection of light from her eyes. Eyes that most people  
<br>would prefer focused anywhere other than them.

><br>Raising a hand, she patted a doll that she held in her lap. The  
floor

>was covered with them, stacked against the feet of the throne like  
<br>supplicants begging for some mercy. Souichi could only watch in  
silence

>and feel glad that it was the doll that had her attention, and not  
him. <br>After the debacle of loosing the Grail to those sailor  
suited brats,

>anything that incurred her attention was a bad thing.<br>

>Without preamble, the figure in the shadows spoke. Her voice was  
rich <br>and not unpleasant. It was the voice of a refined lady.

"So... Sailor

>Moon has the Holy Grail."<br>

>"Y...Yes, she does."<br>

>"Then all is not lost. When the time is right, we shall reclaim the  
<br>Grail. Retrieving it from that good hearted bubble head should  
present

>no great difficulty."<br>

>"Yes Mistress 9. Until then..."<br>

>"Until then you shall continue to find me pure Heart Crystals. I  
have <br>need of the energy that they represent to complete this

>transformation."<br>

>As the light in the room fades, the soft voice of Souichi can be  
heard <br>in gathering darkness. "Yes, My Lady. Our minions have  
already selected

>the perfect candidate..."<br>

>Ranma awoke next morning completely unaware of her benefactor's  
<br>conversation. Long ago she had learned not to tempt fate and to  
sleep

>as a girl. In consideration to her "father's" currently non-leaking  
<br>roof, Ranma always ensured she went to bed as a girl. It was  
generally

>safer for everybody concerned.<br>

>It also saved a fortune in building maintenance.<br>

>As she ate the nice breakfast that was made by Kaori, she once again  
<br>grumbled at the fact that the girl she was impersonating had  
always

>been a goody-two-shoes. Having to wear a school uniform was bad  
enough. <br>Having to wear a girl's school uniform was just horrible.  
It grated on

>Ranma even more since she had a perfectly acceptable set of black  
pants <br>and Chinese red shirts that fit her, but no, the old Hotaru  
had always

>dressed in black, grey and white. <br>

>Then again, she had been pretending to be Hotaru for several years  
now. <br>Since she figured that Mistress 9 would want to establish

her own

>fashion sense when she got control of Ranma's girl half, it seemed like <br>a good time to start making a few fashion changes of her own. Hmm, she

>was meeting Chibi-Usa this afternoon for a drink, so it would be the <br>perfect opportunity to try out the new clothes.

><br>Setting out to school, Hotaru walked alone. A girl that was as much a

>social outcast as her got used to walking alone. 'Perhaps that the <br>wrong way to describe it...' Hotaru thought to herself. 'You never get

>used to being alone, you just learn to live with it.'<br>

>Hotaru almost jumped out of her shoes when she heard the soft <br>whispering in her mind from Mistress 9. "You shall have to get used to

>being alone soon, Ranma. I foretell that the last elements will be in <br>place in only a few months. Then, then you shall truly be alone."

><br>A silly grin split her face from ear to ear. Mistress 9 hardly ever

>spoke to her... it was quite easy to forget that she was always in <br>there, working tirelessly to separate the curse so that they both could

>have a body that they desired. Lately, whenever she had spoken, it was <br>good news. The countdown was getting shorter every day.

><br>"Soon," she said. "Soon I shall have the last ingredient I need to be

>able to take that cursed body from you Ranma. I shall get what I have <br>worked so hard for, and you shall get precisely what you deserve for

>helping me."<br>

>Hotaru chuckled depreciablely, waving a hand. "Aww, I'm only doing what I <br>can."

><br>"Oh, believe me, my Master has special plans just for you. When he is

>here, he will make sure that you will never suffer again."<br>

>While Hotaru blushed and made sounds about how removing the curse would <br>be enough reward, Mistress 9 chuckled silently to herself from within

>the confines of Hotaru's head. It was just like playing a game of <br>chess. If you knew how to move the pieces, they would do your bidding,

>never realising the higher plan that they followed.<br>

>Normally someone in Ranma's position would be described as a pawn, <br>someone to be used and discarded. But Ranma was both too powerful and

>too useful to be a mere pawn. He was a knight, someone strong, and able <br>to be played to a telling effect just where he was needed.

><br>But even knights can be sacrificed.

><br>To the other students gathering at the entrance of the school, Hotaru's

>behaviour was not entirely unexpected. Anyone that can heal people and <br>stayed by herself all the time obviously had something wrong with her.

>Now she was even talking to herself, or perhaps to an imaginary friend. <br>The one thought seemed to go through the minds of every other young

>student that saw her. "Eww, she's strange. I'd better stay away from  
<br>her, or everyone will think I'm strange too."  
><br>The school day ended none too soon and Hotaru awoke feeling  
bright and  
>refreshed. Hundred years of meditation and study had enabled her to  
<br>sleep while sitting, and with her eyes open. Consequently she  
seemed to  
>be one of the most attentive students in the class. The teachers  
were <br>inclined to think that she was a little shy since they  
usually had to  
>ask her the question several times before she answered (or woke up).  
<br>Now that she had slept through the same class three times -  
posing as  
>different students at different schools - she had actually absorbed  
so <br>much information that she could pass as an ordinarily bright  
student.  
><br>After going home and getting changed (just clothes, not gender),  
Hotaru  
>waited for her friend to come over. Even as she began to settle down  
<br>and do a few light kata in her room, she heard the front door  
open. As  
>quickly as she could she sprinted down the hall, skidding to a halt  
<br>just out of view of the front door. Even as she slowed to a stop,  
she  
>could hear Kaori telling someone that 'Hotaru-chan was not home' and  
<br>'she probably would not want to see you when she arrives'.

><br>Stepping around the tall woman, Hotaru was pleasantly surprised  
to see  
>not only Chibi-Usa, but also Usagi and Ami. Standing on her toes,  
she <br>looked around, but could not see Rei or any of the girl's  
other  
>friends. 'Feh! Who'd want to see an uncute tomboy like that  
anyway?' <br>  
>Giving her friends a wave and a quick smile, she turned back to  
Kaori <br>and looked up at the woman. 'Damn, she was tall. I remember  
wishing I  
>could get this body to grow up to be a woman like that for so long.  
But <br>soon, I'm not going to be a girl any more!'  
><br>"I am home Kaori-san, and I do want to see my friends."

><br>Hotaru never managed to decide exactly how Kaori felt about her.  
There  
>was certainly a measure of respect, possibly even fear. A certain  
<br>resentment because her 'father' paid more attention to her than  
Kaori.  
>There was also an undefined attitude, something along the lines of:  
<br>'Don't go outside. Don't see anyone. Don't do anything until  
Tomoe-  
>sensei finishes his work on you. Just stay here and be neither seen  
nor <br>heard.'  
><br>Kaori seemed on the verge of saying something when a hand landed  
on her  
>shoulder. Looking around, her stern visage melted, and she made way  
for <br>Dr Tomoe. Kneeling down in front of the girl that had  
replaced his  
>daughter, he looked her in the eyes. Actually, his one eye looked  
into <br>her two, since he had a strange looking glass eye for one of  
them. But,  
>hey, not everyone is perfect.<br>

>Placing a hand on each shoulder, he spoke solemnly. "I shall see you  
<br>tonight. All shall be in readiness for the next stage."

><br>Somehow, Ranma was pretty sure that she was not the one that he  
was

>talking to.<br>

>After that, the serious expression left his face, and he chased  
Hotaru <br>out the door so that she could have fun with her friends.

He sincerely

>believed that the girl he watched walk away was his own daughter.

With <br>all his heart, he believed that Mistress 9 had worked a  
miracle and

>restored his daughter to full health after the horrific blast in his  
<br>laboratory.

><br>How much of this belief was Mistress 9's mental manipulation,  
and how

>much was honest but misguided hope... no-one could guess. All that

<br>mattered was that he cared for her like his real daughter,  
because he

>thought she was his daughter. In all the ways that mattered normally

<br>for a family she was his daughter, this girl just happened to be

>someone more than just his daughter.<br>

>The fact that his real daughter had been replaced with a  
doppelganger - <br>and that the grievously injured girl had been cast  
out by the Witches 5

>in preparation of Mistress 9 'acquiring' Ranma's body - this sort of  
<br>fact did not impact on his consciousness at all. Mistress 9 was  
also

>quite careful to ensure that nothing Ranma did in his presence was  
too <br>likely to shake his faith. Fortunately Ranma had been  
pretending to be

>his daughter for so long now that any differences that were  
appearing <br>could easily be attributed to the normal changes that  
children went

>through.<br>

>Mistress 9 was also careful to make sure that Ranma never spent too  
<br>much time thinking about the girl that he had replaced, or the

>circumstances involved in the laboratory accident that almost killed  
<br>her.

><br>On the street, Chibi-Usa had just given her best friend in the  
whole

>wide world a small card. Opening up the card, Hotaru looked inside  
and <br>saw a neatly hand written invitation to a party. Recognising  
her

>friend's writing, Hotaru was momentarily nonplussed to see that it  
was <br>at Makoto's place. If Chibi-Usa was having a birthday or  
something, why

>not hold it at her place?<br>

>Usagi was the one that answered that question. "It's not actually  
just <br>for Chibi-Usa, it a party because... because... umm..."

><br>"Because things have been going very well at school recently."  
Ami

>supplied, briefly covering her mouth with her hand as she gave a  
small <br>chuckle.

><br>"Yeah, that's it! Some good things have happened recently, so we  
wanted

>to have a party."<br>

>Chibi-Usa looked at her friend, her big, emotional, red eyes imploring <br>her. She knew that Hotaru was a quiet girl and she did not get out much  
>but she was also one of Chibi-Usa's only real friends that was not one <br>of the Sailor Senshi.  
><br>"Please say you'll go, Hotaru-chan. Please! It just won't be the same  
>without you. Mako-chan will be doing the cooking, and everyone else <br>will be helping to provide snacks and juice and things. It's even going  
>to be fancy dress. Please say you'll go!"<br>  
>Hotaru looked at the invitation again. Indeed it was fancy dress, and <br>this Saturday night too. That did not leave much time to get a costume  
>ready, but she already had a few ideas that were coming together.  
<br>Hotaru turned to Chibi-Usa and gave an entirely sincere smile.

><br>"I'd love to go."  
><br>Chibi-Usa gave her a quick hug, and immediately began to tell her about  
>the costume that she had planned. Mrs Tsukino was already helping her <br>make the costume, and it would be so beautiful, and... and...

><br>Chibi-Usa began to run on and on about how beautiful her costume would  
>be. After ten minutes of listening carefully to what she was saying, <br>Hotaru realised that she now had almost no idea of where she was.

>Looking around, the streets were unfamiliar, and the houses bore no <br>resemblance to the ones she knew in her area.  
><br>Giving a pull on the jacket of the taller girl, Hotaru looked up. "Ami-  
>chan, where are we going?"<br>  
>"Oh, I'm sorry, Hotaru-chan. I didn't realise that you had never <br>visited Chibi-Usa or Usagi before. We're going to their place.

>Actually, we're almost there now. See, that building just down the <br>street."  
><br>Leaving the bunny girls to talk to each other for a while, Hotaru  
>latched onto Ami as a source of interesting conversation. Anyone that <br>is carrying a book to read every time you see them must have something  
>interesting to talk about. <br>  
>"What book are you reading?" Probably one of those mushy romance novels <br>all the girls in her class were starting to get into.

><br>"It's an analysis of Hisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and its effect  
>on quantum level computational gating arrays. It also deals with the <br>macro level analysis of statistical massed electron decision logic  
>versus individual energy level logic states. It's really interesting."<br>  
>Ami recognised that blank look. She had seen it on the other girls too <br>often.  
><br>"It compares VLSI technology with single atom logic..."

><br>"It's about computers."  
><br>Ahh! The light shines at the end of the tunnel.

><br>"Wow! Do you really understand it? I couldn't even understand what the  
>topic was."<br>  
>Making noises to the effect that it was something anyone could learn, <br>Ami kicked off her shoes and added them to the pile at the entrance of  
>the house. Hotaru also took off hers. She also left her staff at the  
<br>door, she did not think that Usagi's mother would really appreciate  
>having a spirit creature set loose in her house. Finally she took off <br>her small backpack. It just contained a change of clothes for her male  
>form: you could never be too careful.<br>  
>Usagi dashed across the room heading for the kitchen, so Hotaru turned <br>back to Ami. "Say, do you have any interest in medicine? I've always  
>wanted to learn more about that."<br>  
>400 years of searching for a cure had made Ranma aware that you take  
<br>every chance you get when it comes to finding new sources of  
  
>information.<br>  
>"Actually, I want to be a doctor when I finish school. I'm just reading <br>this for fun."  
><br>"Just for fun?! You must be so clever."  
><br>Then came a sound. A sound so horrifying, so terrifying that it should  
>have sent shivers down her spine, and might - at any moment - send her <br>running and screaming from the house.  
><br>"Miyaaa."  
><br>Slowly, ever so slowly, Hotaru turned and faced the centre of the  
>house. There, not ten feet away from her, was her most dreaded enemy. A <br>creature so horrible and evil that the very presence should send her  
>screaming from the room. <br>  
>It was black, it had four legs, razor sharp claws, a mouth filled with <br>needle sharp fangs all designed to rip you to bloody pieces. A creature  
>conjured from the bowels of hell. Everything from it's terrifying ebony <br>coat to it's soul searing battle cry should have sent Hotaru and every  
>sane person running from the room in sheer, abject terror.<br>  
>It spoke again: "Miyaaa."<br>  
>This time it even tilted its head; all the better to size up it's prey <br>and rip them into tasty morsels.  
><br>With a grip of steel, Hotaru latched onto Chibi-Usa's arm and pulled  
>the girl in close. "Over there. Don't be obvious. What do you see?"<br>  
>Chibi-Usa looked around. Everything seemed to be in place. She had not <br>even seen Usagi come out of the kitchen stuffing her face yet, and  
>Shingo was already in his room, doing whatever it is that boys do.  
<br>"Umm, a cat?"  
><br>Aside from a brief tightening of her grip when Chibi-Usa said it,  
>Hotaru hardly responded. Turning to her right, she looked up to see a <br>concerned Ami staring at her. "Is that what you see too, Ami-chan?"  
><br>Ami looked. The only thing that really was interesting on that

side of

>the room was Luna. She was sitting on the top of the couch doing her  
<br>best imitation of a normal cat. Fundamentally, it meant that she was

>not speaking out loud, since that was the only way people could tell  
<br>her from a normal cat.

><br>In a voice almost a whisper, Hotaru leaned over and spoke to Ami. "Just

>a c-c-c--. Just an ordinary, everyday, perfectly normal c-c-c-. A  
<br>normal housec-c-c--"

><br>Ami smiled. Hotaru looked so funny stumbling over the word cat. I can't

>tell her that Luna is one of the Queen's advisors and a talking cat  
<br>kept in stasis for the millennium since the Moon Kingdom fell.

That

>would be letting the cat out of the bag, to use a really bad metaphor. <br>"Sure. That's Luna. She's Usagi's pet cat. Perfectly normal cat."

><br>Hotaru shuddered. She did not know if it was someone using the 'C' word

>so often in one breath that did it, or what she was seeing in front of  
<br>her. Here was a perfectly normal family: Mum and Dad and three kids.

>They take an animal in from the kindness of their hearts, and this is  
<br>what happens.

><br>There were monsters all over Tokyo these days, but Hotaru had not

>expected to find one living so close to her friends. She did not know  
<br>exactly what magic it was using, or what subliminal signals it was

>missing, but that thing in front of her was no 'C' thing. If it was,  
<br>she would have been out that door and screaming before she even turned

>around and looked at it. <br>

>Yet here she was. Not ten feet away from the most fearsome creature on  
<br>man's earth... or an almost perfect replica of one. It had already

>uttered its war cry not just once, but twice, and Hotaru was still  
<br>here. Obviously this was no real 'C' thing, and that only left one

>option: some sort of monster or demon had wormed it's way into the home  
<br>of one of her dear friends. No doubt the vile fiend would consume them

>in their sleep, or destroy their souls one by one. <br>

>Hotaru shuddered. It was a fate worse than even a c-c-c--- a 'C' thing  
<br>lover deserved. Hotaru would be damned before she would let that happen

>to a kid as nice as Chibi-Usa. Even Usagi was too nice to let that  
<br>happen to. Sighing, Hotaru hoped that revealing some of her strengths

>would not disrupt Mistress 9's plans too much, but there was no option.<br>

>Keeping a hold on Chibi-Usa and Ami, they waited only a few moments  
<br>until Usagi came out to investigate the sudden silence.

><br>As Usagi exited the kitchen, Hotaru reached into her pocket and pulled

>out one of her demon wards (Remember kids, be prepared. You never know  
<br>when a demon is likely to attack you.)

><br>"Usagi-chan. Could you come here please. Quietly, please. Yes that's



>it. No, no please, don't pat Luna. That's it. OK, now when I  
distract <br>it with a ward, everyone run out of the house."

><br>In her concerned and stressed state, Hotaru failed to notice  
just how  
>confused everyone else was. Hotaru had been acting perfectly normal  
<br>until she came into the house and saw Luna. Now she seemed to  
have gone  
>nuts.<br>  
>Faster than any of them could react, Hotaru pulled out a demon ward,  
<br>holding it between her first and second fingers. As the strip  
fluttered  
>slightly, she called out charging words of power and sent the strip  
<br>flying towards the unsuspecting Luna.  
><br>"Rin, pyou, tou, sha, kai, jin, retsu, sai, zen. Akuryou  
taisan!"  
><br>The glowing ward streaked out and caught Luna above the eyes,  
sticking  
>directly over the crescent moon symbol on her forehead. Even as the  
<br>ward was in the air, Hotaru was bring her hands together in front  
of  
>her, preparing a Moko Takabisha that would destroy this demon for  
the <br>rest of all time. Never again would it pass itself off as  
someone's  
>pet. No matter how horrid a creature it chose to impersonate.<br>

>The Ki sphere was half formed between her palms when the ward  
struck, <br>and the effect was instantaneous. The very moment that  
the glowing ward  
>struck and obscured the crescent moon symbol, Hotaru's eyes widened  
to <br>the size of dinner plates and her blood ran cold.

><br>Before she could focus the Ki and attack, she lost control. Ki  
freed  
>itself from confinement in a bright blue flash that pushed them all  
<br>back slightly. Before the girls had even finished staggering,  
Hotaru  
>was screaming. Turning on her heel and running like an Olympic  
<br>sprinter, she literally ran through the closed door and out onto  
the  
>street.<br>  
>"YAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!! CAAAAAAAAAAT!!! CAAAAAAAAAAT!!!"<br>  
>Her voice abruptly cut off. Less than four seconds after pulling out  
<br>the ward, the three Senshi turned to each other and tried to  
understand  
>what had happened. Turning to look out of the shattered remains of  
the <br>door, Ami saw the crumpled form of Hotaru lying at the base  
of a  
>knocked over telegraph pole. The only possible explanation was that  
<br>Hotaru had tripped over the fallen pole and knocked herself out.  
Ami  
>refused to even \_think\_ about any other possible answer. Even if she  
<br>did think that pole had been standing earlier... 'No! I refuse to  
even  
>consider that possibility!'  
>Chibi-Usa ran for her friend who was lying on the ground, closely  
<br>followed by Ami. Ami knew that she was needed there because she  
was  
>probably the only person in the area that had even the slightest  
<br>medical knowledge. Usagi ran to look after Luna.

><br>Reaching the confused kitty, she noticed that Luna seemed completely  
>unharmd, with the obvious exception that it was acting like a normal <br>cat. Reaching down, Usagi pulled off the ward and revealed the crescent  
>moon marking. Instantly Luna's faculties were restored to her and she <br>was quizzing Usagi on what had happened. Unfortunately Usagi was as  
>much at a loss as anyone else. The only person who stood a chance of <br>being able to answer their questions was currently being tended for  
>concussion.<br>  
>Hearing footsteps approaching the front door, Usagi grabbed Luna around <br>the waist and threw her out of the room. Bounce, bounce, skid. "Hide in  
>there for a minute, Luna-chan. Listen in and we might be able to find <br>out what happened."  
><br>Ami and Chibi-Usa were escorting a shaken looking and rather nervous  
>Hotaru back into the room. "See, Hotaru-chan. There's nothing to be <br>afraid of here."  
><br>"No, no you don't understand. It's not just the c-c-c--- Luna.  
  
>Actually, it is Luna. She's not really what you think. She's some sort <br>of demon, just pretending to be your pet!"  
><br>Ami sat down and lifted Hotaru onto her lap. Placing her arms around  
>the still shaking girl she tried to comfort her by talking through her <br>fears.  
><br>"But why do you think that Luna's a demon?"  
><br>"Because I'm afraid of c-c-c--- You know, them."  
><br>"If the way you ran through the front door is any indication, that has  
>to be the strongest fear I have ever heard of. But why do you think <br>Luna is a demon?"  
><br>"Because I wasn't afraid of her."  
><br>Ami went 'Ahh!' and smiled in understanding. The other two girls just  
>looked blank. Ami took up the explanation, she might be able to clear <br>things up for the girls since she understood both sides of the story.  
><br>"What I think Hotaru-chan means is that she has a really serious case  
>of ailurophobia---"<br>  
>"Hey! How can you say that? I've never even met an ailuro, so how can I <br>be afraid of one?"  
><br>"Ailurophobia is the fear of cats, Hotaru-chan."  
><br>"Oh."  
><br>"So when you saw..."  
><br>"Why don't they call it nekophobia then?"  
><br>"Because 'neko' is Japanese for cat, and 'ailuro' is Greek."  
  
><br>"The Greek were afraid of cats?"  
><br>"No, no, no. Greek is a language, not a just people. Lots of words are  
>in Greek, especially medial ones. For the moment, will you just accept <br>that's the word? It will make things much easier to sort out."  
><br>Hotaru nodded. Craning her neck, she then looked over Ami's shoulder to

>see if the monster had come back. It had certainly seemed like a  
<br>real... 'C' thing just a little while ago. Four hundred years of  
having  
>the Neko-ken had given her a supernatural appreciation for the  
presence <br>of cats. She rarely slipped into her 'Cat Mode' these  
days because she  
>would run in fear so soon at the slightest presence of a cat. Not  
only <br>that, but there were very few obstacles that could force her  
to stay  
>close to a cat long enough to be affected.<br>  
>Ami waited patiently for Hotaru to stop squirming on her lap. She  
hated <br>to tell little lies like this, but for the safety of  
everyone  
>concerned, she knew that she would have to. Besides, if Hotaru could  
<br>get used to Luna, she might be able to break down her fear of  
cats.  
>When she finally had Hotaru's attention again, Ami brushed a couple  
of <br>hairs back from the girl's pretty face and tried to make  
contact with  
>the nervously shifting eyes.<br>  
>"I can understand that you're afraid of cats, but Luna is a very  
<br>special cat. Next time you see her, look at her head. There's  
this  
>little crescent moon marking there. That means she's very special.  
Luna <br>has been specially blessed so that she won't make people  
afraid.  
>Everyone likes her, there's nothing to worry about. <br>"Just think  
of Luna as a perfectly normal cat that you don't need to be  
  
>afraid of."<br>  
>Watching the way that suggestion made Hotaru go grey and shudder,  
Ami <br>tried again.  
><br>"All right, try thinking of Luna as a person, or a dog or some  
other  
>pet, that just happens to look like a cat. How's that?"<br>  
>"I don't know if I can... but I'll try."<br>  
>Chibi-Usa nudged her friend. "Mina-chan has a pet too. He's called  
<br>Artemis. Artemis is such a lazy kitty that he makes Mina-chan do  
all  
>the work for him. Even though he and Luna argue all the time, he's  
<br>special too. Maybe you should meet him?"  
><br>Hotaru shuddered. Two of them. They were everywhere. Hotaru  
latched  
>onto Ami and shook as her fear held her. Even just thinking about  
them <br>too much was bad. Not bad enough to send her into the  
Neko-ken, but bad  
>enough to be thoroughly unpleasant. After a while, Hotaru released  
the <br>bigger girl and gave a wan smile to Chibi-Usa. "Maybe... some  
other  
>day.. perhaps."<br>  
>For her part, Usagi was struck dumb (a rare event to be treasured).  
As <br>soon as Ami had begun her explanation, she had a sudden  
flashback. She  
>was sitting on the floor of the royal hall, playing with the sandals  
of <br>Sailor Venus. If she was lucky, Venus would be distracted by  
the  
>spectacle long enough for the Princess to tie her feet together.<br>  
  
>Today's spectacle was Sailor Saturn making one of her rare  
appearances <br>at the palace. Her husband had come of course, and

that was where the  
>trouble started. The instant he had seen the Queen's advisor, he had  
<br>gone berserk and tried to kill her. Currently Sailors Mars and  
Jupiter  
>were holding him back, and Sailor Mercury was trying to calm down  
the <br>two other Outer Senshi that also happened to be there.

><br>When Luna was safely hidden out of the room, Saturn Knight  
finally  
>calmed down and explanations were given. For some reason (Moon was  
too <br>busy to pay attention to this bit) the poor man went  
psychotic every  
>time he saw a cute, furry animal (which could lead to real problems  
if <br>ever he met a grizzly bear). Normally he would just kill the  
animal and  
>feel better, but that could have serious repercussions if he  
happened <br>to get one of the Queen's advisor's alone for a while.

><br>Fortunately, Serenity had found this part of his psyche when she  
had  
>cast her Healing. At the time she found she could not do anything  
about <br>it because it was so deeply ingrained. She had also  
forgotten Luna and  
>Artemis, since she never expected Saturn Knight to encounter any  
small <br>animals. Now that she knew there really was a problem,  
there was only  
>one solution.<br>  
>After finding the cats, Queen Serenity had cast a powerful spell on  
<br>them. From now on, no-one would see them as threatening unless  
directly  
>provoked. To anyone that saw them, they would be innocuous, and  
<br>completely innocent. Later that day they tested the spell and it

>worked. Saturn Knight was perfectly capable of being in the room  
with <br>them, and never having any problems.  
><br>Usagi was stunned by the sudden revelation. Ami was completely  
right in  
>what she said, she just did not know it. Usagi sighed. She was so  
lucky <br>to have a cat like Luna. Even girls like Hotaru who were  
afraid of cats  
>could be friends with her.<br>  
>They spent the rest of the evening at Usagi's place, playing games,  
<br>reading manga and having fun. Luna was generally careful to stay  
away  
>from the group. Even if she did not scare Hotaru, there was no need  
to <br>push her luck.  
><br>Despite the precautions that Luna took, Hotaru managed to find  
her in  
>the corridor as Hotaru was walking to the bathroom. With a quick  
look <br>around for witnesses, Hotaru got down on her hands and knees  
and  
>brought her face close to the cat.<br>  
>"I... I can't believe I'm this close to you, and I'm not freaking  
out. <br>This is scary just by itself."  
><br>Luna curled up on the floor and tried to make herself as small  
and as  
>innocent as possible. Who could resist the charm of her big  
eyes?<br>  
>"Luna, I know you're just a cat, and you can't understand me, so  
this <br>promise is more to me than to you. If you ever try and claw

my eyes

>out... If you ever try and eat me alive... If you ever scream into my ears as you rip them to shreds... If you ever sit on my back, slowly

>raking the skin from my body... I'll kill you. I don't know how. I don't even know how I'll be able to get close enough to hurt you, but I

>will. "Please be good, Luna. I don't want to hurt Usagi-chan and Chibi-Usa,

>'cause they really like you. I don't want to have to run away from you every time I see you. So please... be nice."

>Luna was stunned. What in the name of the Moon had happened to this

>girl? Judging by the sorry and sad tone that she was using, and the way that the tears fell down her face, Luna knew she was trying to bolster

>her own confidence, not threaten her. What had happened to the girl that could cause this sort of reaction? Who could make cats do that

>sort of thing?

>Luna sat there deep in thought and completely missed the fact that Hotaru had gotten up and returned to Usagi's bedroom with the other

>girls. It was only when she heard Hotaru's voice did she realise that the girl was not longer crouched in front of her.

>"By the way, Ranma has neko-phobia too."

>Ami: "That's ailurophobia."

>"Neko-phobia."

>"Ailurophobia."

>"Neko-phobia."

>"Ailurophobia."

>"Neko-neko-neko-neko.... Blargh! I said it! Ahh!"

>"Ailurophobia."

>"Ailurophobia work for me too: I'm not afraid of ailuro's, so it's easy

>to say."

>\* \* \*

>Hotaru was not the only one to receive an invitation to the party. In an attempt to stay in contact with some of their non-Senshi friends,

>the girls were inviting other people that they knew. People from school, some friends from the arcade, that sort of thing. Since Usagi

>was organising the invitations, she even asked the Outer Senshi.

>In a rare moment of friendship between the Inners and the Outers, Michiru and Haruka agreed to come; the even offered to invite all of

>their friends. So Michiru invited Haruka, and Haruka invited Michiru. The other motivating advantage was the opportunity to study that

>strange Tomoe girl again. No-one specifically invited Setsuna: she would come if she wanted to whether she was invited or not, and Usagi

>was not really sure how to get in contact with her anyway. Since she assumed that the Guardian Of Time was probably watching over her most

>of the time, Usagi spent two days with an open invitation to Setsuna sitting on her desk... who knows, it might work.

><br>Finally, Rei was given the task of inviting Ukyo and Ranma, since she  
>had the easiest contact with them. Ukyo was all alone in Tokyo, she was <br>Hotaru's only friend aside from Chibi-Usa, and she was also Ranma's  
>best friend. Since Ranma and Hotaru were being invited, Usagi's  
<br>generous heart had demanded that Ukyo be invited also.

><br>Holding the invitation in her hand, Rei advanced on the Okonomiyaki  
>shop. She was not thrilled in the least about inviting Ukyo. Sure, they <br>got on OK, but that was about all. Since the first time Ranma had come  
>here with her, the pair had visited for dinner or a snack a few times <br>since. While Ukyo's welcome was entirely correct, there was less of  
>the warmth that she would usually give the other customers.<br>

>As she stepped across the threshold, Rei also remembered why she did  
<br>not like Ukyo. It was the way that Ranma went out of his way to be nice  
>to her. Noting was too hard to do for his Ucchan, his 'cute fiancée'. <br>Ohhh, how that gritted on her nerves, even though she did not care what  
>he did.<br>>Seeing her customer, Ukyo's face broke into a smile. "Hiya Rei-chan. Is <br>Ranma with you?"  
><br>"Sorry, Ukyo-san, not today."  
><br>Watching the way the chef's face fell, Rei felt a pang of

>understanding. Ranma was the whole reason for the shop. If he was not <br>coming here, then the rest of the evening would just be marking time  
>for Ukyo. From their previous talks, Rei knew that Ranma's habit of  
<br>being impossible to find was something that had lasted his whole life.  
>No-one knew where he lived, and if he was not around, it seemed  
<br>impossible to find him.  
><br>No matter how Ukyo strove to gain Ranma's attention, Rei could not hold  
>a grudge against the girl, she was just too nice. (Besides, it is  
<br>notoriously difficult to be angry and hold a straight face when your  
>enemy is all smiles and wearing a massive spatula tied to her back. But <br>then, Rei had never witnessed the devastating power of the Kuonji  
>family style of Okonomiyaki Martial Arts.)<br>>Taking Rei's order, she waved the Priestess to a seat at the counter  
<br>and set about making one of her super tasty works of art. Rei gave a  
>smile and waved an envelope in front of her. When Ukyo finished the  
<br>food, she swapped it for the invitation and had a read.

><br>"So Ranma will be going to this too?"  
><br>"I seeing him tonight for training, so I'm pretty sure that he will be.  
>Hotaru will be there too... Come on, it'll be good for you to get out <br>once in a while."  
><br>Ukyo grimaced as she thought about the amount of time that she was

>spending taking care of her restaurant. Time that would be much better <br>spent with her fiancée, taking long, romantic walks through the neon  
>lit streets of the evening city. Or time spent cuddled up to him in  
<br>some cosy corner at a party somewhere.  
><br>"Suuuure. I think a party would be great. Hmm. Fancy dress too. I'm  
>going to have to think about that one."<br>  
>"Great, I'll see you then."<br>  
>Rei waved and walked out of the shop, having given Ukyo the money for  
<br>the food. As Ukyo watched the figure retreat out the door, she smiled  
>and whispered into the muffled sounds of the other customers.<br>

>"Oh, I think you see me sooner Rei-chan. Since I know where Ranma is  
<br>tonight, I think it is the perfect chance to give him a little home  
>delivered Okonomiyaki. Just to remind him what he is missing out on."<br>  
>Back in Rei's room at the shrine, a small black pig was wandering  
<br>around. It had taken him almost an hour to get out of her closet, but  
>since then he had found his way to the sacred fire's room three times,  
<br>and still had not found the bathroom so that he could change back.  
><br>As he leapt onto her desk, Ryoga thought about how nice the little  
>temple girl was that lived here. She was so sweet and innocent. When  
<br>she had picked him up her hands were warm and soft. Even just going  
>through her cupboard had been nice; it reminded him of how she smelled.<br>  
>Walking over Rei's homework, Ryoga fantasised about how he could  
<br>torture Ranma. Someday, somehow he would make Ranma's girl fall in love  
>with him, and together they would go off, leaving Ranma heart-broken  
<br>and crying.  
><br>It is remarkably difficult for a foot long black piglet to master the  
>art of the sinister belly laugh, but Ryoga tried. Rather than the awe  
<br>inspiring "BWAH HA HA HA!" that shook the whole room, he got the  
>almost-as-good "Bweee Bwe Bwe Bwe!" Ryoga broke off suddenly and looked  
<br>down. Who was he kidding. A mighty raging boar could do an intimidating  
>laugh. A cute piggy could not.<br>  
>With his head drooping, he happened to read the characters under his  
<br>snout: "Ra. N. Ma... Ranma?!?"  
><br>A quick peruse showed the truth. It was an invitation to a party. A  
>party this Saturday. A party he could find Ranma at and kill him once  
<br>and for all.  
><br>After memorising the address, Ryoga jumped to the floor and ran looking  
>for the hot water so he could prepare to terminate Ranma's miserable  
<br>excuse for a life. As he chanted his favourite war cry, he bumped into  
>a hard metal wall. Looking around, he noticed the fantastic view he  
<br>could get once he moved past the metal beam.  
><br>Since when was Rei's shrine at the top of Tokyo Tower?

><br>\* \* \*

><br>Shampoo held her hand's in front of her and worked up the courage to do

>the unthinkable and question her Great-Grandmother. Finally, she built <br>up the courage and looked across at the old woman who was putting the

>finishing touches on the counter she was standing behind.

"Great-<br>Grandmother..."

><br>Cologne's large eyes twinkled and she hopped to the one of the tables

>in the restaurant. "Come sit child. I shall be very happy to answer <br>your questions about Ranma."

><br>Startled by the fact that her thinking was that obviously transparent,

>Shampoo took a seat and collected her scattered thoughts. Finally the <br>big one came out. The one that frightened her more than anything else.

><br>"Great-Grandmother, did Husband beat you in fight?" It was almost

>unthinkable. The Matriarch of the Amazons, beaten by a mere man that <br>was only around her age.

><br>"No. He may have, but we did not fight to the end. We fought until he

>proved that he really was an Amazon."<br>

>"How Husband do that?"<br>

>Cologne gave a happy and nostalgic smile. Fortunately there were no <br>customers around yet: it might have scared them away. "He reminded me

>of something that only he could have known about. Ranma is an <br>honorary Amazon. Exactly how and why... that is something that you will

>have to get from him. His name in the village is Soap, it was given to <br>him because... Ah, well, I can't give away all of the surprises."

><br>A small frown crossed her brow. "If Ranma Amazon, why you want Shampoo

>marry him so much."<br>

>"Oh, my dear, dear child. There are more reasons for that than you <br>could possibly imagine. First, and foremost, I love Ranma as much as I

>love you. I can honestly say that I cannot think of a single woman in <br>the entire world that would make a better wife for Ranma than you

>would. Can you imagine my joy if two people I loved so much were to be <br>married?

>"Also, Ranma used to be married to a girl called Akane. I don't know <br>what she was like, he hardly ever spoke of her, but even when I knew

>him, he was still pining away for the girl. Surely someone like you <br>could bring happiness back to him, and revitalise his spirit."

><br>Cologne reached across the table and took Shampoo's hands. "You also

>must understand what a good husband he would be for you. If he can <br>carry his love for Akane so long, imagine how strong his love for you

>will be. He is smart, talented beyond compare, and the strongest male <br>the tribe is likely to ever see.

>"You could do much worse for yourself than Tendo Ranma."<br>



>"Aiyaa... Shampoo no realise you know Husband so well."<br>  
>"Hmm, well it was a while ago."<br>  
>"But... Husband Shampoo's age. How you know him but I no know?"<br>  
  
>"That is another story you must get from your husband yourself. All I <br>can say is that he is actually a little older than you - he hides his  
>age even better than I do! Also, there is a minor magical complication, <br>but he has assured me that it is shortly to be of no concern."  
><br>"Ohhh, Great Grandmother so smart. She also know where Shampoo find  
>Husband so he can take Shampoo on date?"<br>  
>Cologne flourished a piece of paper from within her sleeve. "It just so <br>happens that I copied down this address for a party he should be  
>attending this Saturday. Most people would find that a perfect <br>opportunity..."  
><br>She was talking to an empty seat. Shampoo had taken the piece of paper  
>and was hugging it to her breast and dancing around the room as though <br>it was actually Ranma she was holding.  
><br>Cologne smiled. It felt so good to see Soap again after all this time.  
>Not only that, but she would soon be marrying her two favourite people <br>in the world. Could things get much better?  
><br>-----  
>End Of Chapter.<br>  
><br>  
><br>

## 22. Bringing The House Down

>The characters contained within this story are owned by Takahashi <br>Rumiko and Takeuchi Naoko. No infringement of copyright is intended.  
>This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the current <br>author.  
><br>Thanks to my pre-readers:  
>Ben<br>aevan  
>Ifurita@mechapilot.com<br>ukie davidgao@seas.upenn.edu  
><br>  
>This is a crossover between Ranma 12 and Sailor Moon. To make the two  
>stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates at <br>which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor Moon. I bow  
>my head in shame: please forgive.<br>  
>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to its <br>story timeline...  
><br>This story is dedicated to the letter K and the numbers 4 and 5.  
  
><br>  
>Visit my website at<br>dzillman@ozemail.com.au  
  
><http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>  
> \_\_\_\_\_<br> / \  
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \ \_\_\_\_\_/

><br>

><br>What has gone before:

>While on a training trip with his father during the early 1600s, Ranma <br>fell into the spring of the drowned young girl.

Unfortunately, his

>curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he  
<br>has spent most of his time in his cursed form. Not only that, but

>because the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year old <br>girl who never ages.

><br>In the present...

>Ranma has received a partial cure for his curse by the spirit entity  
<br>called Mistress 9. She will eventually take his girl's body, freeing

>him entirely, so now he poses as Tomoe Hotaru. Unfortunately, he now  
<br>seems to have a few problems with the ladies, since he is inadvertently

>engaged to Hino Rei (he's taking lessons in Shinto), his old buddy  
<br>Ucchan, and the friendly Amazon Shampoo. That doesn't even start to

>include Mako-chan, or the fact that two of his best friends are only  
<br>three foot tall: Cologne and Chibi-Usa.

><br>At the end of the last chapter, Ranma and Hotaru were both invited to a

>fancy dress party by Rei, Chibi-Usa and their friends. Oddly enough, a  
<br>few of Ranma's fiancées also seemed to get invitations by one means or

>another.<br>

>-----<br>Bringing The House Down

>-----<br>

><br>Ranma smiled as she pulled the last bow into place on her costume. It

>was too long since she had been to a decent party. Ever since she had  
<br>started posing as Tomoe Hotaru, she did not have any real friends.

>Well, not until recently. Now she had Chibi-Usa, Sailor Mars, Ucchan,  
<br>Shampoo, Cologne, Mako-chan, oh and Hino Rei too. Not to mention all of

>Chibi-Usa's and Rei's other friends. <br>

>Admiring herself in the mirror, Ranma gave another smirk. No-one would  
<br>have a better costume than she would tonight. Not for the first time,

>he was glad that his female half was as cute as his male half. It would  
<br>hardly do to wear a costume like this if he was a tomboy or something.

>Ranma forced down a giggle thinking of Rei dressed the way she was at  
<br>the moment.

><br>On the subject of Rei, the last part of her present had arrived today

>too. The little lead figurine was sitting on his dresser, looking  
<br>completely innocent. Old buddy Wydiclaw, had come through perfectly

>once again. He might be getting old now, but he clearly remembered his  
<br>comrade-in-arms, Ranma The Rebel. Over the last month he had been

>sending parts to Ranma in Japan, and finally she had the perfect gift  
<br>for Rei-san.

><br>Placing her hands together in front of her, Ranma formed a 'pistol'

>with he two index fingers. 'Fireball', she whispered, and a small, low <br>powered, sphere of flame ripped across the room smashing into the cast  
>lead statue on her dresser.<br>  
>With a spring in her step, Ranma crossed to the dresser and picked up <br>the piece of hard metal that now stood revealed.  
><br>"Ah! Hot! Hot!"  
><br>Juggling it for a few moment, Ranma let the metalwork cool, the  
  
>attached it to the other bits she had. Just perfect, someone as <br>vulnerable as a temple maiden needs a little help in staying safe.  
>Especially when their city of residence is filled with demons, Daimons <br>and evil witches. It was unlikely this little toy could save her, but  
>it might keep any attackers distracted long enough for help to arrive.<br>  
>Secreting the gift in her costume, Ranma headed off. It was time to <br>really make some jaws drop. Just wait till they saw her!

><br>Makoto looked around her apartment and wondered when Ranma would be  
>getting there. So far all of the invited guest aside from him and his <br>sister were here. They even had one uninvited guest: the Amazon  
>succubus that was after her boyfriend. Not that she was being insulting <br>by saying that, Shampoo had actually come dressed as a little, red  
>skinned, seductive demoness, complete with a red tail and arrow head <br>end. Despite all the nasty thoughts had about how Shampoo was trying  
>such an obvious tactic to seduce Ranma, Makoto had to admit she did a <br>good job on the costume.  
><br>Currently Shampoo was working in her kitchen. Initially Makoto had been  
>reluctant to let a barbarian girl into her precious kitchen, but a <br>short period of observation had easily dispelled that idea. Her  
  
>Japanese might be broken, but her cooking skills were in fine <br>condition, and Makoto was sure that Shampoo was probably just as  
  
>skilled as she was with a frying pan or wok. If only Shampoo could be <br>taught how to ask for the right ingredients, the two of them could have  
>such fun cooking together.<br>  
>This also assumed that Shampoo could be made to give up on her <br>boyfriend.  
><br>Wiggling her way past where Usagi and Mamoru were sitting, Makoto  
>decided to make another trip to the kitchen. Earlier, she had been <br>gently removed from her favourite spot when it was peacefully invaded  
>by Ukyo and Shampoo. Ukyo was yet another girl that was trying for <br>Ranma. How could one man get so many girls chasing him?  
Especially  
>since none of the girls had ever gotten particularly far with him. As <br>far as she knew, no-one had even received an innocent kiss goodnight,  
>let alone anything more serious. <br>  
>Taking a deep breath, Makoto inhaled the lovely aromas of cooking

<br>Okonomiyaki. Despite the fact that she was dressed as an eagle - a skin  
>tight, feather patterned bodysuit with funny yellow feet and a pair of <br>feathered wings stretching under her arms - Ukyo had immediately  
>managed to produce a portable griddle from somewhere the instant that <br>she learned no-one was serving Okonomiyaki at the party. In all  
>honesty, none of the organisers had even considered fresh Okonomiyaki <br>as a pre-requisite to a successful party, but Ukyo assured them that no  
>truly great party was without it.<br>>Watching the two girls working frantically and furiously in the kitchen, <br>she finally understood what Ukyo had meant when she referred to the  
>Okonomiyaki school of cooking martial arts. Shampoo had simply nodded <br>at that point and challenged her to see who could cook the most and the  
>best for the party. Currently the Ukyo was tossing out a wide array of <br>her speciality to anyone who wanted it. Not to be outdone, Shampoo was  
>generating tray after tray of intricate Chinese delicacies and finger <br>food.  
><br>There was a definite competitive edge to the girls, but to an outside  
>observer it looked a friendly competition. Shampoo had yet to draw her <br>sword or bonbori, and Ukyo still had her battle spatula slung. (How  
>does an eagle fly wearing a battle spatula?) Moving forward to a brief <br>clear spot, Makoto cleared some space on the bench.

><br>"Care to take on another challenger?"  
><br>The two girls did not even stop moving to answer her; they just turned  
>around and gave a smile. It was a threatening, challenging smile. A <br>smile that asked: 'Do you really think you are in our league?'  
Makoto  
>had never tried a martial arts cooking competition like this before, so <br>she was glad that they had decided to leave the fighting aspect to  
>another time. On the other hand, it was her kitchen, her food, she was <br>an excellent cook, and she knew all of the favourite dishes of every  
>person there. There was no way that they were going to beat her in her <br>own kitchen.  
><br>The already massive flow of snack foods from the kitchen increased by  
>another fifty percent, and even Usagi was hard pressed to keep up with <br>the flow of available food.  
><br>Through the din of conversations and background music, above the hiss  
>and bubble of the cooking, and past the clatter and bang of the <br>cooking, a knock could be heard at the front door. By mutual consent,  
>all three girls called a temporary truce and ran out into the main <br>room. If Ranma was here, then they all wanted to be at their best  
  
>appearance. <br>>Shampoo cleaned off her hands and twirled her tail slightly. Ukyo <br>spread her wings and preened in preparation. Makoto, who was

dressed as

>a cowboy, straightened her belt and looked over at Rei. Rei was  
<br>reclining in a chair talking to Ami. Rei was obviously not  
worried if

>it was Ranma, and that suited her fine. Rei had decided to come as a  
<br>traditional samurai, and Ami was dressed in a very slinky mermaid

>outfit.<br>

>Ami's mermaid outfit had probably been the biggest surprise of night  
so <br>far. It was not that anyone did not recognise her affinity  
with water,

>it was just that she was normally such a conservative girl. When Ami  
<br>had appeared wearing the green and blue swimsuit with the fish  
scale

>pattern, they had been stunned. She had even dyed her hair with a  
<br>temporary blue that suited her quite well, and her makeup, tail  
and

>aqua coloured scale leggings made her look stunning. <br>

>All the girls immediately felt jealous, but the modest way she  
moved, <br>and the compliments she showered on their own costumes  
made them all

>feel much better. Ami was even enjoying the party more than anyone  
<br>expected. Currently she was cornering Michiru and talking to the  
older

>girl in friendly terms, discussing things that most of her friends  
<br>would not be as capable of understanding.

><br>Looking across the room to where Chibi-Usa had gone to answer  
the door,

>Makoto was delighted to hear her girlish scream of delight. Ranma  
must <br>be wearing something pretty special to get a rise like that  
out of

>Chibi-Usa. Perhaps he was dressed as Hercules, or maybe he was  
<br>appearing as one of those muscled, shirtless pirates, or perhaps  
he was

>dressed as a slave to be sold at the markets, or... <br>

>Hang on. Chibi-Usa's twelve. She has not even begun to think about  
<br>those sorts of things yet. Which would mean that she would not  
even

>care what Ranma was wearing. To Chibi-Usa, Ranma was simply Hotaru's  
<br>brother, and no more important than that. Just give her a few  
years and

>she would begin to realise what a great catch Makoto had made.<br>

>Makoto watched as Chibi-Usa walked around from the front door again,  
<br>desperately trying to stop from breaking out into a massive  
smile. She

>looked incredibly cute in her little angel's outfit. She had a pair  
of <br>small wings, and was all done in white with gold trim. The  
look of

>unbridled happiness that she wore only made her look even more like  
the <br>part.

><br>Clearing her throat, Chibi-Usa coughed and got everyone's  
attention.

>"Now may I present, my very best friend: Tomoe Hotaru!"<br>

>Hotaru literally leapt into the room. With a quick spin, she pointed  
an <br>arm and struck a pose.

><br>"Ai ya seitou no dairi toshite, atashi wa SEERAA chibi MAAZU  
yo."

>"For love and justice, I am Little Sailor Mars!"<br>

>And she was. Right down to the finest details, this was definitely a  
<br>miniature version of the fiery Sailor Mars. From a ruby-like gem  
in her  
>tiara to the soles of her small red high heels, she was Sailor Mars.  
<br>True, Rei's hair was longer, but you can't have everything.

><br>Silence reigned supreme in the room for long seconds, before  
several of  
>the guests started clapping and cheering. Oddly enough, when the  
cheers <br>started, it was the Senshi that were the last to join in.  
Every one of  
>them was looking at the costume and trying to decide what about it  
<br>seemed so strange.  
><br>Never before had they seemed someone who looked so right in a  
Senshi  
>costume, yet somehow she seemed... wrong... out of place... Maybe it  
<br>was just the wrong colour for her, they were used to seeing her  
wear  
>black or dark colours. Perhaps if she wore a costume that was  
darker, <br>perhaps a blue skirt with a black bow would be more her  
colour... But  
>then, no Senshi actually wore colours like that.<br>  
>The costume was simple, but it was perfect. Makoto did not know how  
<br>much time she must have spent studying Sailor Mars to make sure  
she had  
>everything right, she just wished she had better taste and chose the  
<br>tall and beautiful Sailor Jupiter.  
><br>Rei was the first to react, naturally enough. As the clapping  
and  
>cheering finally began to abate, she made her way over and looked  
down <br>at little Hotaru. She was standing next to Chibi-Usa,  
blushing at the  
>attention she was getting, Rei kneeled down in front of her so that  
<br>their eyes were almost level and looked her over again. Amazing,  
the  
>girl seemed to have every little detail down perfectly. <br>

>"Wow, you really did a great job on the costume there, Hotaru-chan.  
Did <br>Kaori help you make it?"  
><br>Hotaru looked at her feet, and rotated the point of one red shoe  
into  
>the ground. She seemed embarrassed to be complimented like this.  
<br>"Sewing's something I sort of picked up along the way... It helps  
if  
>you can make your own clothes and stuff."<br>  
>"So did you find a pattern or something?"<br>  
>"No... I did it all from memory."<br>  
>Rei was impressed. Sure, there was not much to a Senshi's uniform,  
but <br>Hotaru obviously had all of the little details right. She had  
the angle  
>right for the curve in the tiara; she even had the little five  
pointed <br>stars for ear-rings. "Do you like Sailor Mars?"

><br>"Yeah, she's the best. Sailor Mars is the strongest and best of  
them  
>all. If I was bigger, I would want to be like Sailor Mars. She's  
cute <br>too."  
><br>Rei blushed a fiery red. "I think she's the best too."

><br>Minako rushed up, landing right next to Rei so that she could

face

>Hotaru. "No, no, no. Sailor Venus is the cutest. She looks so pretty in <br>that orange skirt, and she has the best attacks too."

><br>"WHAT? No way does Venus have the best attack. Supreme Thunder is much

>better than Venus-Love-Me Chain! Not only that, but Jupiter's stronger <br>than Mars any day."

><br>Minako got back to her feet and looked up at Makoto, staring the taller

>girl in the eye. "She might be stronger than Mars, but there's no way <br>someone as tall as Sailor Jupiter can be as cute as Sailor Venus."

>Switch targets. "Isn't that right, Hotaru-chan? Sailor V's always been <br>the best."

><br>"Well, the papers say she was pretty good in England, but now Sailor

>Mars is here, and no-one is smarter, stronger or cuter than she is."<br>

>Another voice chimed in behind Hotaru, and she looked back to see Ami <br>in an earnest stance; hands clenched below her chin. "You don't mean

>that, do you Hotaru-chan? Sailor Mercury is the smartest of all the <br>girls."

><br>Hotaru nodded. "She might be smart, but I bet Sailor Mars is just as

>smart. Sailor Mars has the rest of them beat hands down."<br>

>Rei nodded vigorously. "See, Hotaru-chan knows what she's talking <br>about."

><br>Makoto looked over at her friend who had one hand possessively on her

>fan's shoulder. "Come on Rei, you and I know that Sailor Jupiter is <br>stronger than Sailor Mars..."

>"Sailor Mercury is definitely smarter..."<br>"And Venus is the cutest..."

><br>Somehow Hotaru knew she should have consulted some of the others before

>choosing her costume. She never realised that these girls were such <br>dedicated fans. Looking up at them, she considered for a moment. You

>know, if they all got together, they could have done a good theme at <br>the party. Minako would make a great Sailor V, or whatever she was

>calling herself now... the mask would hide some of the differences in <br>facial features. Mako-chan would make a good substitute for the girl in

>the green skirt. Ami would do a creditable job as Sailor Blue Skirt; <br>again, she could keep the visor down so that people would have a hard

>time seeing her face.<br>

>Naturally, there was only one choice for Sailor Mars... That left Rei <br>to dress up as Queen Serenity's husband, the guy in the tuxedo. A

>tomboy like her should have no problem with that. Smiling quietly to <br>herself, Hotaru knew she would have to suggest this for the next party

>they had. These girls would make a knockout group of vigilantes. <br>

>All was going well for a while: each of the girls was arguing with <br>increasing vigour who was the best Senshi and Hotaru was just

standing

>there watching. It was nice to see that Rei could get all flustered and <br>aggressive even without Ranma. Suddenly Usagi broke through their

>little circle. Tears were forming at the edge of her eyes and her lower <br>lip was quaking dangerously as she teetered on the edge of tears.

><br>"But... But... What about the pretty soldier Sailor Moon? Isn't she the

>best at something?"<br>

>Hotaru looked up at her with confusion. "Who?"<br>

>"S-Sailor Moon."<br>

>"Who's Sailor Moon?"<br>

>"WHAT? No! You have to know Sailor Moon, she the leader. She's the <br>beautiful Moon Princess. Come on Hotaru, you've got to know her, you

>know the rest. Waaah!<br>"Fighting evil in the moonlight. Finding love in the daylight. Never

>running from a real fight. She is the one named Sailor

Moon...<br>"She's got red boots and she's got a pretty blue skirt and she's got

>the Moon Sceptre and she's got..."<br>

>"Oh! I know who you mean now: Queen Serenity."<br>

>"No, Sailor Moon."<br>

>"Hey, I'm the one with the Spirit Staff from the Moon Kingdom. I'm the <br>one who studied them in Tibet. I know what I'm talking about, even

>Takuhi agrees, and he saw her once. That's Queen Serenity. She's the <br>Queen of the whole Moon Kingdom, and the best ruler in the whole

>world..."<br>

>Usagi almost collapsed in relief. All right, Hotaru-chan had the name <br>wrong, but she had the right idea. Sailor Moon was the best ruler ever.

>And she was cute, and strong and powerful, and everyone loved her...

<br>Usagi started to drift away into a dream world where everyone loved her

>and she was always in her Moon Princess form. So caught up in her <br>dreams, she barely managed to catch Hotaru's next words.

><br>"Mind you, now that I think about it... the Moon Kingdom's been dust

>for thousands of years now. So these can't be the real sailor suited <br>defenders."

><br>All the girls jumped on that one: "YES, THEY ARE!"

><br>Rei gave the shocked girl a quick squeeze. "Sorry, Hotaru-chan. We just

>all big fans just like you. \_I\_ think that they're the reincarnation of <br>the originals."

><br>Hotaru paused for a moment and sucked on her lip. "Could be... but I

>don't believe in reincarnation. If it could happen, then I'd still have <br>Akane."

><br>Rei remembered what Ranma had said only a few days ago. 'Akane loved

>Hotaru as much as she loved me.' The poor little girl must have thought <br>of her as another mother or maybe a big sister. The way Ranma talks

>about her, she must have been the most caring and sensitive person in <br>the whole of existence. Anyone that could get Ranma's praise



must be a

>saint and a paragon of womanly virtue. He even told me once that her  
<br>cooking was something that you would remember for the rest of  
your

>life, even if you've only had one bite; you would never want to  
<br>anything ever again. This is from a guy that has had the best  
Makoto,

>Shampoo and Ukyo can offer; Akane must have been an amazing cook.  
<br>

>Rei was not the only one to notice their little guest getting sad.

<br>Usagi saw it quickly too, and leapt back into the fray, trying to  
score

>points for her favourite Senshi: herself. "Hey, Sailor Moon's still  
the <br>best because she has Tuxedo Kamen. None of the other's have a  
handsome

>and mysterious man like him."<br>

>In the background, Hotaru could see Mamoru cringe slightly. Poor  
guy, <br>his girlfriend is hung up on some superhero that she'll  
never get to

>meet. "I don't know about that Usagi-san. I think Sailor Mars is  
still <br>better off. She has Saturn Knight, and he's much better  
than Tuxedo

>Kamen."<br>

>A bubble of silence descended on the small cluster of people near  
the <br>front door. It was only a week ago that any of them had even  
heard the

>name Saturn Knight, and here was a non-Senshi that seemed to know  
the <br>name, and his personal predilection to Sailor Mars.

><br>Rei kneeled down in front of Hotaru and looked her in the eyes  
again.

>"Hotaru-chan. Where did you hear the name Saturn Knight?"<br>

>Hotaru wondered that herself. It was only moments ago that the name  
<br>popped into her head. "Oh... Um... Sure... Everyone knows about  
Saturn

>Knight, right? The handsome tuxedo suited defender of Saturn, and  
um... <br>actually... I kinda think that was all he defended. But  
yeah, everyone

>knows about him... Don't you?"<br>

>Not to be outshone by some little kid when it came to knowledge  
about <br>the Sailor Senshi, Usagi piped up. "Sure. \_I\_ do. Maybe  
\_Rei-chan\_

>doesn't, but I do."<br>

>"Come on, Usagi-chan, that's not nice, and you know it."<br>

>Usagi stuck out her tongue. "Piiiiida!"<br>

>Seeing Rei's famous temper coming to bear on someone other than her  
<br>male half, Hotaru smiled, and then side stepped through the two  
glaring

>teenagers. "I'm just going to go say hello to Ucchan and  
Shampoo."<br>

>Distracted for a moment, Rei looked down at Hotaru. Wow, this girl  
gets <br>around. "You know Shampoo?"

><br>"Didn't we just do this? Sure, everyone knows Shampoo. She's  
the...

>um... Chinese suited defender of ... um... defender of ramen! See  
ya!"<br>

>It took the girls a while to recover from a joke that bad, and by  
then <br>little Hotaru had slid through their group, then past Naru -

Usagi's

>one time best friend at school - and her boyfriend, who was also from <br>Usagi's school.

><br>Naturally enough, Ukyo and Shampoo had departed during the other girls'

>'discussion' about the Sailor Senshi. Neither Ukyo nor Shampoo knew <br>much about the Sailor Senshi, and neither of them cared too much about

>them. As far as Ukyo was concerned, their reputation was overblown <br>considering the fact that they could not save her friend Kikyo.

Since

>they were not Amazons, Shampoo knew that they obviously would not be as <br>good as her or her great-grandmother. Most importantly, none of the

>Sailor Senshi were after Ranma, so they did not even enter the final <br>equation.

><br>Shampoo and Ukyo were both strangers in the city so it was nice to be

>invited to a party, a good chance to make new friends. Most of the <br>people there were a bit younger than they were, but basically they were

>fun to be with. Ukyo had spotted a sweet looking couple about her age <br>in one of the corners of the room when she had come in. She only had a

>little time to observe them before Shampoo had arrived and they had set <br>up their little contest, but Ukyo would have sworn that the boy was the

>well-known racer Tenou Haruka. <br>

>At the start of the night Ukyo had vowed to herself that she would <br>spare some time from being with Ranma to talk to Haruka. Perhaps he or

>his girlfriend could offer Ukyo a few tips on how to land a catch like <br>Ranma.

><br>It had been over an hour since she first arrived - with Shampoo

>arriving only minutes later. Every minute that ticked by, she wanted to <br>leave the kitchen and spend some time with the racer and his

>girlfriend. It was not that she disliked cooking (far from it), it was <br>the fact that she was rapidly beginning to dislike Shampoo.

><br>From the very beginning, Shampoo had talked about her 'husband'. It was

>as though the girl assumed that they were already married, and she was <br>just waiting for Ranma to work up the courage to sweep her off her

>feet. 'As if that would ever happen': Ukyo knew that she was Ranchan's <br>one and only girl. Poor Shampoo obviously did not realise this, and got

>just a little bit upset when Ukyo had casually mentioned the fact that <br>she was actually Ranma's fiancée.

><br>That had been about forty minutes ago, and since then, things had

>gotten progressively more 'enthusiastic' between the two girls. It had <br>started out fairly innocently, Ukyo called Shampoo a 'Purple Haired

>Bimbo' and Shampoo called Ukyo the 'Stupid Spatula Girl'.<br>

>Then there had been that time when Shampoo accidentally threw four <br>sharp knives that just missed Ukyo's head. Ukyo gritted her teeth

and  
>smiled, she took it in the same way that Shampoo took it when Ukyo  
<br>'accidentally' retaliated with eight skewers and a couple of  
throwing  
>spatulas. <br>  
>Shampoo was preparing for some serious toe-to-toe combat against  
Ukyo <br>when Makoto arrived. Instantly both girls were smiles and  
happiness  
>again. They were both guests here, and it would hardly do for their  
<br>hostess to see them duelling in her kitchen, even if it was in  
good  
>fun. With someone in the kitchen acting as an overseer, the two  
<br>competitors managed to stay on good behaviour, this was even more  
true  
>when Makoto joined in the cooking challenge. All the girls had to  
<br>dedicate their every thought to food just to stay in the  
competition.  
><br>Hotaru's arrival and their break from cooking seemed to diffuse  
the  
>situation for a while. With Makoto out talking and a generous supply  
of <br>cooked delicacies ready, Shampoo and Ukyo seemed to have some  
spare  
>time.<br>  
>"Spatula Girl... Who new girl?"<br>  
>"Hmm... Oh, that's Hotaru. She's Ranchan's little sister. Used to be  
my <br>best friend a few years ago."  
><br>"Why you no meet then?"  
><br>"What? You think I could fight my way through that crowd of  
girls to  
>see her without doing some serious violence? Honey, you have another  
<br>thing coming, besides, I know she'll be here as soon as she can  
get  
>past them, and I don't like beating up on people who are younger  
than <br>me."  
><br>"Shampoo understand. Why Great Grandmother no mention Husband's  
  
>sister?"<br>  
>"Why would she? I mean she's probably never even met Hotaru  
before."<br>  
>Shampoo delicately placed a finger to her lower lip as she thought.  
<br>"Spatula Girl could be right. Great Grandmother know all about  
Husband,  
>but she no mention little sister."<br>  
>"Yeah, well, they're a bit of an odd family that one. Honestly, I've  
<br>never met any brother and sister that are closer than them, they  
seem  
>to tell each other everything, even the little things that you never  
<br>even bother mentioning."  
><br>"Why that strange?"  
><br>Ukyo leaned against one of the kitchen counters and gestured  
vaguely  
>with one hand. "Nothing's strange about that. What is weird, is the  
way <br>that they seem to be almost embarrassed of each other. I've  
known  
>Hotaru since we were both little girls, she was living with a foster  
<br>family and called Ai then. In all that time, and ever since I've  
been  
>in Tokyo with them, not once have I seen the two of them  
together."<br>  
>"That strange... Hmm, Great Grandmother mention Husband have curse.

<br>Maybe little sister ashamed of curse."  
><br>"Ranchan's cursed? I've never heard that one before. Humph.  
Don't think  
>you can scare me away from my Ranchan just by telling me he's  
cursed. <br>We've been friends for years, and he is about the most  
uncursed person  
>I've ever met. Private: yes. Cursed: no."<br>  
>"Do you still want him now that you know he's cursed?"<br>  
>Both of the girls turned guiltily to see a sombre looking Hotaru in  
the <br>doorway. Ukyo was not the first to recover, but Shampoo  
showed no signs  
>of apologising for what they had been saying. "I'm sorry  
Hotaru-chan. <br>We weren't really talking about you behind your  
back. I just never knew  
>that Ranchan was cursed."<br>  
>"You didn't answer my question."<br>  
>"Well, I guess it depends on what his curse is."<br>  
>"Shampoo want know too."<br>  
>Hotaru put a smirk on her face and sang her next words. "But I'm not  
<br>gunna tell youuuuuu."  
><br>A wicked gleam came to Ukyo's eyes as she raised her hands and  
advanced  
>on the little Senshi. "Oh, I think we could tickle it out of you...  
<br>Don't you Shampoo?"  
><br>Shampoo gave a predatory smile to match Ukyo's. "Shampoo agree  
with  
>Spatula Girl. Little Girl never resist ancient Chinese Amazon...  
TICKLE <br>ATTACK!"  
><br>From here things got confusing. First it was Shampoo and Ukyo  
against  
>Hotaru, but when Chibi-Usa saw Hotaru succumb to the bigger girls,  
she <br>leapt into the fray. Seeing her biggest (or smallest) fan so  
set upon,  
>Rei also joined in, which worked well until someone hit one of  
Ukyo's <br>flour bags, covering the kitchen in white dust. By the  
time Makoto was  
>involved it had degenerated into a tickling free-for-all that  
quickly <br>left everyone on the floor gasping for breath and  
shuddering as the  
>compulsive laughter finally faded.<br>  
>All of the girls sat on the kitchen floor and grinned at each other.  
<br>Chibi-Usa sat in Makoto's lap, and Hotaru in Rei's. Hotaru had  
  
>struggled at this for a few moments, after all she was a guy, and  
this <br>was hardly the sort of thing you would want to be doing with  
a tomboy  
>anyway. After a while she relented and settled down. 'I mean,  
Rei-san <br>thinks I'm a girl, so it not as though anything could  
happen. Besides,  
>Rei-san like Sailor Mars too, so I suppose it shows she has good  
taste <br>in something.'  
><br>Makoto looked around her white covered kitchen and sighed. This  
is one  
>room that could wait until the morning to clean. "Anyone want to  
tell <br>me what this was all about?"  
><br>"We were trying to get Hotaru-chan to tell us what Ranma's curse  
was."  
><br>"RANMA IS CURSED?"  
><br>Ukyo shrugged her shoulders and looked at the other girls.  
"Comes as a

>surprise, doesn't it. Shampoo only told me tonight too."<br>  
>Rei gave Shampoo her famous glare. "Come on, Shampoo. You can't  
<br>seriously expect us to believe that Ranma's cursed, can you?"

><br>"It true. Great Grandmother tell Shampoo: Ranma cursed. Great

>Grandmother never wrong."<br>

>Rei looked down at the passenger on her lap. "Come on, Hotaru-chan.  
<br>Defend your brother. Don't just sit there and let Shampoo start  
rumours

>about him."<br>

>Hotaru twisted her index fingers together and looked rather nervous.

<br>"Well... That is to say..."

><br>Rei bounced Hotaru on her lap slightly. "You man she wasn't  
lying? Hmm,

>well. you'll tell us what his curse is, won't you, Hotaru-chan?"<br>

>Hotaru squeezed her lips shut and shook her head back and  
forwards.<br>

>"Why not?"<br>

>"Because... Because Ranma's embarrassed, and I'm embarrassed. It's a  
<br>stain on our family honour, and has been for the longest time.

But...

>but most importantly, I'm not going to tell you, because you might  
<br>never find out. In just a couple of months, Ranma's going to be  
cured.

>No more curse. All gone. Forever."<br>

>Rei gave Hotaru a brief hug, trying to cheer her up since this talk  
was <br>obviously distressing her. Unfortunately for the boy trapped  
inside

>Hotaru's body, the gentle hug did anything but calm her down. "It's  
OK. <br>You don't have to tell us if you don't want to."

><br>Rei shared a look with the other girls. Hotaru did not have to  
tell

>them, but there was no way that they would go easy on Ranma the next  
<br>time they saw him.

><br>They talked for a while, and people drifted in and out. After a  
time,

>Rei stood Hotaru up, and struggled to stand up, her legs filled with  
<br>pins and needles.

><br>Hotaru covered her mouth in shock. "Rei-san! I've just realised,  
I've

>got a present for you, and I completely forgot to give it to  
you."<br>

>Rei gave a wry chuckle. "And my being paralysed by you sitting on my  
<br>legs makes you remember?"

><br>Nod, nod. Hotaru turned away and fumbled down her top for a few

>moments, eventually turning back with her present.<br>

>Rei's jaw dropped. Nothing less than completely stunned would  
describe <br>the situation. Hotaru had presented her with a silver  
staff, over three

>foot in length, with a billiard ball sized ruby mounted on the head  
of <br>the staff. Rei was not sure what surprised her the most: the  
fact that

>Hotaru was offering her a present that was worth a fortune, or the  
fact <br>that she had managed to produce a three foot staff from  
within her

>Senshi costume.<br>

>"H.. H... How did you do that?"<br>

>"Do what?"<br>  
>"How did you hide it? I didn't even see it... For that matter, I didn't <br>even feel it when we were tickling each other in the kitchen."  
><br>"That? Oh, that's nothing. It's a hidden weapons technique I learned in  
>China. See."<br>  
>It was like watching a magician at work. Even moving slowly, Hotaru <br>slid the staff into one glove, then she demonstrated pulling it out  
>from under the neck-scarf style collar of the Senshi's uniform. Then <br>she did it again, right in front of Rei's eyes.  
><br>"See, it's all sleight of hand."  
><br>Rei shook her head, staring numbly until Hotaru forced the staff  
  
>between her fingers. "Hotaru-chan. I can't accept this. It's too <br>expensive. It's just too much. You hardly know me, and this must have  
>cost you a fortune."<br>  
>Hotaru looked hurt for a moment, then her face grew earnest. She had to <br>get Rei to accept this staff. "Rei-san, it's not just from me, it's  
>from Ranma too. You don't know what sort of effort we had to go through <br>to get it here for you. First I had to send a letter to an old, old  
>friend in Tibet, and he used the old Catholic underground to ship it to <br>another friend in Poland.  
>"In Poland, someone that owes me a favour, Mr Wydicslaw - he's a first <br>class smuggler - broke it down. He sent it bit by bit to Japan, and  
>then I reassembled it here." <br>  
>Hotaru remembered Wydicslaw's reaction to the ruby... Lina always had <br>go a bit overboard when it came to making magic jewels.  
  
><br>"But... why? Why so much? It's a beautiful staff, but why send it like  
>that, surely your friends in Tibet could have sent it here just as <br>easily."  
><br>"No, no, no. The Japanese government is way too cautious about  
  
>spiritually and magically active items entering the country to allow <br>that sort of thing."  
><br>"Are you trying to tell me this is a magic staff?" The story just got  
>wilder and stranger at every turn.<br>  
>"No, silly. No-one makes them any more. This is a spirit staff, like <br>Takuhi's. But this one's got access to the Tochou."  
  
><br>"What's the Tochou?"  
><br>Hotaru grinned. "Spiritual chainsaws... sort of. This staff is for your  
>protection, Rei-san. The city's just too dangerous these days. All you <br>have to do is hit the staff onto the ground and say 'In the name of  
>Tendo Ranma, I summon...' Then you say their name. Pretty easy really." <br>  
>"What? Like this? In the name of Te---"<br>  
>Covered in a cold sweat, Hotaru yanked the stick from Rei's hands and <br>clamped another hand on her mouth. "No! Careful, this is dangerous.

>It'll also only work ten times. Look, point it this way. See, this bit  
<br>is towards your target. The Tochou will appear and then just rip things  
>up until it stops or runs out of distance."<br>  
>Hotaru sighted down the staff and thought about 'accidentally'  
<br>releasing a Tochou at the unsuspecting Michiru in her sights. Sighing,  
>she decided against it and handed the staff back to Rei.<br>

>"Look Rei-san. I know you're worried about the cost of the staff, but  
<br>it's all right, really. If you're really worried, you can just borrow  
>it until you've used all of the summons on it." 'Yeah, right,' Hotaru  
<br>though. 'Then I'll just spend a couple of weeks recharging it.'  
><br>"Oh, and don't try and summon one inside your shrine. It could get...  
>messy."<br>  
>Before Rei could protest, Hotaru left the stunned girl and moved  
<br>through the party. She had two more people to see before she left.  
>Someday she would have to have a chat with Usagi about her taste in  
<br>party guests.  
><br>"Hello, Michiru. Killed anyone else recently?"  
><br>Michiru went white. How could anyone say that? It was not her fault  
>that the girl had died. If anyone, this strange little girl should be  
<br>accusing the Witches 5 and thanking Michiru for saving so many others.  
>Hiding her pain, and stilling the overly protective Haruka, Michiru  
<br>leaned down to give Hotaru a few harsh words about respect for her  
>elders. <br>  
>Before Michiru opened her mouth to speak, Ranma eased his iron control  
<br>over his Ki. With her eyes glowing a brilliant, flickering blue, she  
>too leaned in. "Don't even think of hurting any of these girls here.  
<br>That would really put you on my bad side."  
><br>Taking advantage of the stunning effect of those burning eyes, Hotaru  
>doused their fire and grabbed Haruka, pulling her ear in close.<br>

>"And you! You make me sick! Killers I can understand, but you and your  
<br>sick little mind games! I don't care if she is one of the bad guys, I  
>can't stand what you're doing. Pretending to be a guy, and all the  
<br>while you're a girl? That's really low. Even a fool can see she loves  
>you. She might be a killer, and so might you, but when she finds out  
<br>that her 'boyfriend' is really a girl, it's going to hurt her more than  
>I ever could.<br>"Have at least some heart. Admit you're a girl and break it off now  
>before it becomes any worse."<br>  
>Before either of the stunned girls could respond, Hotaru moved away to  
<br>say her goodbyes to the others at the party. As she disappeared into  
>the crowd, Haruka stuck her arm around Michiru and nibbled on her ear.  
<br>"You know I'm a girl, don't you?"  
><br>Michiru blushed as red as Sailor Mars' skirt. By this stage it

would be  
>difficult for her not to know.<br>  
>Five minutes later, Ranma appeared through a window. Moving for all  
<br>world like he had been circulating for a while, he contrived to bump  
>into Mamoru and (of course) Usagi. <br>  
>"Hey, Mamoru-san. This is the first time I've seen you since the  
<br>school, isn't it?"  
><br>Mamoru fidgeted nervously. He and Hotaru had talked, surely she had  
>explained things to her brother... If not... it was too crowded to  
<br>fight in here, but Mamoru was determined that he would do a better job  
>of defending himself than last time. In the last few weeks he had done  
<br>some serious training. There would be no way Ranma would catch him by  
>surprise like he did last time.<br>  
>Adopting a slightly defensive posture, Mamoru prepared himself.  
"Yeah. <br>Bit of a misunderstanding that."  
><br>Ranma chuckled and scratched under his short pony tail. "Um... Yeah...  
>Ha, ha... Um, I just wanted to say that I'm really... um... I mean, I'd  
<br>do it again in an instant if I thought it was true... But it wasn't and  
>Usagi and Chibi-Usa and everyone explained it to me, so... Well, I  
<br>wanted to say that you're not a bad guy and all... So, if... like..."  
><br>Mamoru smiled. "It's OK, Ranma. You don't actually have to say you're  
sorry."<br>  
>He sagged visibly in relief. "Thanks... Not that I'd have a hard time  
<br>saying I was sorry or nothing. I just.. you know what I mean. Um...  
>Hey, Usagi, that's a real pretty dress, suits you real good, it does."<br>  
>Usagi smiled and clung to her Mamo-chan's arm. Everyone had said that  
<br>going as a Princess and her Prince was just a little too obvious.  
>Besides, she wore that sort of thing every chance she got. But Ranma  
<br>liked her costume. He thought she looked nice. Usagi looked up at the  
>face of the man whose arm she was holding. Not that Ranma mattered:  
<br>Mamoru - Prince Endymion of the Moon Kingdom - thought she looked nice  
>as a Princess, and that was what mattered.<br>  
>Of course, it didn't hurt if the other boys realised how cute she was.<br>  
>Ranma was walking through the guests, saying hello to people that his  
<br>male half had never met. The biggest problem pretending to be two  
>people was trying to remember who he should greet, how he should greet  
<br>them and what he was supposed to know about them. Now that he had  
>bumped into most of the people that Hotaru had been introduced to, he  
<br>should be fairly safe from any sort of slip up.  
><br>As he moved through the people, he could start to feel something.  
>Someone was watching him. Several people. Ranma looked around. No-<br>one... just all the party guests. Catching a smile from Ukyo, Ranma



>retreated slightly; if she caught him now, he knew she'd ask him about <br>the curse.

><br>Dodging between a young couple and grabbing a glass of something fizzy,

>Ranma resurfaced and came almost nose to nose with Shampoo. <br>

>"Beloved Husband!" Shampoo cooed as she tried to latch onto his neck.<br>

>Back-peddling furiously, Ranma managed to trip over a low table as she <br>got her arms around him. "Sh-Shampoo. What are you doing here?"

><br>"Shampoo come party, be with Husband. Yes?"

><br>As he felt her snuggle up against his chest, Ranma retreated. Backing

>into the kitchen he waved his hands and tried to keep her off him, <br>without actually touching anything that he shouldn't. Or at least

>anything he thought he shouldn't, Ranma was pretty confident that <br>Shampoo's ideas of what he should and should not touch were different

>to his own.<br>

>Safely in the kitchen and hidden from view from most of the party, <br>Ranma sighed in relief. Gods, this would have looked bad if the tomboy

>had seen him, especially with her temper. Then again, Ucchan never made <br>much of a secret of her possessive streak either. Ranma swallowed in

>fear: the last thing he needed was to find out if Mako-chan had the <br>same penchant for hitting him for every imagined infraction.

><br>Suddenly Ranma's danger sense pinged and the kitchen no longer felt

>like a quiet haven. In fact, it was more the quiet before the storm. <br>Taking his eyes from the mass of purple hair that was firmly attached

>to his chest, he slowly looked around.<br>

>"Get off him now you Chinese Bimbo!" <br>

>"Shampoo, you were supposed to lure him here so we could ask about his <br>curse."

><br>"Ranma! How could try and seduce someone in the middle of Mako-chan's

>kitchen?"<br>

>Makoto flicked an eye at Rei, but chose not to comment. 'I don't mind <br>him seducing someone in my kitchen, it's more a matter of who he

>seduces.'<br>

>Shampoo turned her face up to him and blinked her big brown eyes at <br>him. In her most seductive voice she asked. "Ranma tell Shampoo about

>curse? Then Ranma take Shampoo on date?"<br>

>Ranma place his hands on her shoulders and tried to push her away. "No <br>way! I ain't telling nobody about my curse till it's cured, and then

>I'm definitely not."<br>

>Ukyo slid up to him and put an arm around his shoulder, none to subtly <br>trying to dislodge Shampoo at the same time. "It's OK, Ranchan. We

>don't really mind what it is, we're just curious."<br>

>Makoto began to see red. These girls were making moves on \_her\_ <br>boyfriend, in \_her\_ kitchen, at \_her\_ party. She had not felt

this way

>about a guy since her old boyfriend, so there was no way she would give <br>up without a fight. "Hey, Hey! What do you think your doing?"

><br>That pervert! Here he was, playing with her feelings again! Rei had

>invited him to this party, went to all the effort of being nice to him <br>recently, and now he's got two of his own fiancées draped over him, and

>he's trying to seduce Mako-chan. Look at him: waving his arms, trying <br>to reach for every girl in the room.

><br>"Ranma you pervert! How could you do this to me?" Silence held for a

>moment as the frying pan bounced off Ranma's head and landed on the <br>floor. Rei dashed from the room, silver tears drifting behind her.

><br>A moment later, Ranma awoke and opened his eyes. Perhaps that was not

>the best idea. From where he lay, he looked up at Shampoo clad in tight <br>red, Ukyo's pert, feathered body, and straight up the short skirt of

>Makoto's cowboy costume. Now was definitely not the right time to be <br>lying on the kitchen floor with his eyes open.

><br>Almost levitating to his feet, Ranma sprang from the room. It seemed

>like everything was happening too fast. Ranma knew what a jealous woman <br>was like, Akane got that way every time a girl came anywhere near the

>dojo. Surely none of these girls could be that possessive but he did <br>not want to take the chance.

><br>Why did things like this happen to him? He was engaged to his best

>friend. Another one of his best friends was doing her level best to see <br>him marry her great granddaughter. One of the sweetest girls he had

>ever met had apparently fallen for him head over heels (which for her <br>is a long trip). Not only that, but there was some strange arrangement

>with his tomboy teacher. All that, and he had found a girl who he could <br>really like, but they were both afraid to lower the masks that they

>wore.<br>

>Ranma needed some time to think, time to get away. Time to find out <br>more about the lovely Sailor Mars and how she felt about him.

><br>Watching their prey escape, the girls set aside their rivalries and

>sprinted after him. After two laps of the living room, Rei joined in, <br>saying something about 'can't trust him with that many girls without

>supervision'. After that, the entire assembly ran out of the room, to <br>dash screaming and yelling into the night.

><br>Watching them leave, Michiru wished that Makoto had a piano in her

>apartment: she had a sudden urge to start playing the Benny Hill Show <br>ending theme. Then again, maybe she would just go home and read Don

>Juan De Marco again.<br>

>The departure of Ranma and his entourage seemed to indicate that the <br>party was coming to an end. In pairs and singles, people

departed.

>Usagi offered to stay around and help eat the remaining food until  
<br>Makoto returned, which let Michiru and Haruka leave for a short trip

>back to Michiru's place. <br>

>Descending the stairs from Makoto's apartment, they passed a heavily  
<br>built boy wearing dusty clothes, he was well muscled and had a broad,

>honest face. He was probably quite attractive... if you were into that <br>sort of thing.

><br>"Excuse me Miss. Is this the way to Kino Makoto's place?"

><br>"Yes, just up those stairs."

><br>"Heh, heh, heh. Tendo Ranma, now you shall pay for what you have done

>to me."<br>

>Looking up that the retreating figure, Haruka looked at her shorter  
<br>companion. "You don't suppose that was Mako-chan's old boyfriend?"

><br>"It could be, she was always saying how great he was. Maybe he's upset

>with Ranma for stealing his girlfriend..."<br>

>The shrugged their shoulders and walked out of the building, not  
<br>hearing the muted cry of frustration. Once again, Ranma had run like a

>coward and had avoided meeting Hibiki's wrath.<br>

>Hotaru's comments earlier to Haruka had stirred something in both of  
<br>them. Firstly there was the anger that someone would talk that way to

>them and about them. Then confusion; you would need to have lived in  
<br>the remotest mountains for the last hundred years not to realise that

>they were lesbians. Not only that, but it was a perfectly acceptable  
<br>situation. Apparently that was something that little Hotaru had not

>realised yet.<br>

>The most powerful feeling that Hotaru's impassioned speech had  
<br>generated was that of love. Hotaru was closer to an enemy than an ally.

>They were suspicious of her motives for nearly everything she did, and  
<br>they knew that there was something indefinably not right about her and

>her father. For all of that - and her limited association with them -  
<br>she had seen how strongly they were in love. Holding each other's

>hands, Michiru and Haruka walked to the car, each basking in the warmth  
<br>of the love that they shared.

><br>Somehow it should not have come as a surprise to them to see the

>Guardian of Time waiting at their car. Setsuna was nonchalantly leaning  
<br>against it, for all the world looking like she had just arrived, and

>had been expecting them to arrive just then.<br>

>"I am concerned about Saturn Knight."<br>

>As the women entered the car, Michiru mentioned how she overheard  
<br>Hotaru talking to the Inner Senshi this evening. Apparently she knew

>about Saturn Knight also.<br>

>"Yes, that is true." Setsuna gave a small wave, implying that she  
<br>already knew this.

><br>"Do you know how she knew, Setsuna-san?"  
><br>"This morning, during the demon attack, that's the second time any of  
>us have been threatened by Saturn Knight."<br>  
>It was more of a statement than a question, but the younger women  
<br>nodded confirmation anyway. If Setsuna wanted to avoid answering a  
>question, there was no point in asking it again. <br>  
>This morning had been an ordinary demon, not one of the Witches 5  
out <br>searching for Heart Crystals. Every now and again some  
monster or  
>creature from the nether hells would break through into this world.  
At <br>times like these, the Sailor Senshi still responded. Although the  
>Mamono Hunters and other assorted groups did what they could, this  
area <br>of Tokyo was generally taken care of by the Senshi, even for small  
>events like a single minor demon appearing.<br>  
>"He was rather adamant when we spoke. He told me that if we hurt the  
<br>Inner Senshi, he would hunt us down. He also said that if I tried to  
>interfere in his personal life again, then he would kill me."<br>  
  
>Setsuna gave a small chuckle. "That part was almost exactly what he  
<br>said to me all of those millennium ago. Something to do with when I  
>tried to arrange a marriage for Sailor Saturn to a Venusian  
prince."<br>  
>"Do you expect any sort of problem from Saturn Knight?"<br>  
>"No. Saturn Knight is a nothing. He's no-one that matters really. If  
he <br>were a threat to us, I would have dealt with him long ago. For that  
>matter, if he is going to be a threat in the future, I would also  
know <br>that."  
><br>To herself, Setsuna reflected on the fact that when she had  
asked her  
>future self whether Saturn Knight would be a bad influence on Sailor  
<br>Saturn, the Crystal Tokyo Senshi had laughed. Setsuna knew that she  
>rarely laughed, especially at serious questions. Unless she changed  
<br>radically, she surmised that there was nothing to worry about Saturn  
>Knight. <br>  
>Haruka took up the thread of conversation. "All right, so we just  
<br>ignore Saturn Knight. But I have to ask, if he was such a pest, if you  
>hated him, and the Queen barely tolerated him... Why would she send  
him <br>into the future with the Senshi and Endymion?"  
><br>After a moment silence, Haruka spared her eyes from the road and caught  
>Setsuna's expression. She was deep in thought, probably trying to  
<br>decide why her Queen would make such a decision. A decision that  
  
>Setsuna no doubt regarded as a bad one. <br>  
>"I'm not certain. I can find out, but it's not really important....  
<br>What I think happened is that Sailor Saturn sent him forward."  
  
><br>"Sailor Saturn!?"  
><br>"Indeed. You must realise, while the Queen was powerful beyond anyone

>else, she was not the only one with great power. If she could manage to  
<br>send her daughter, four Inner Senshi, three Outer, and her daughter's  
>husband-to-be, someone would only need one ninth of her power to send  
<br>one man.  
>"Sailor Saturn had very little of the power that Queen Serenity had  
<br>when it came to anything other than a direct battle. However, in a  
>direct battle, there was no-one that could compare. She could cast a  
<br>powerful healing spell, and she had some potent battle magic, but her  
>real power lay in her devastating final attack. A final attack that  
<br>could destroy a planet.  
>"Someone with that power, properly motivated, may be able to send  
<br>someone's soul forward in time."  
><br>"So what are we going to do? If Saturn Knight is here, now, then  
  
>doesn't that mean that Sailor Saturn is going to be awakening soon?"<br>  
>"She may indeed. She is not awake yet, but I know she will awaken soon.  
<br>Less than a week ago I felt someone discharge a substantial portion of  
>Sailor Saturn's magic. Few others in the world would recognise it as I  
<br>would, but I have seeking it for thousands of years. The opportunity  
>for Sailor Saturn to be raised without Saturn Knight was too valuable  
<br>to pass up. When she awakens, I, and the two of you, will be  
>instrumental in continuing to raise and educate her."<br>  
>"But you don't expect Saturn Knight to have something to say about  
<br>that?"  
><br>"True, Michiru-san, it did have me worried for a long time once I knew  
>that he was active. Since then, I have taken steps. I am now completely  
<br>confident that Saturn Knight will not have an adverse affect on Sailor  
>Saturn. I also know that the pair of you shall be her guardian in the  
<br>future."  
><br>That suitably impressed them. It was rare for Setsuna to give any sort  
>of definite answer with regards to the future, so this was obviously an  
<br>issue she felt strongly on. It was also an issue that their  
  
>foreknowledge would have little or no effect. Even without  
<br>reassurances, the Senshi would ignore Saturn Knight, now they would  
>just have added faith in their decisions. Similarly, it would give them  
<br>time to adjust to the idea of looking after another girl and mentoring  
>her. <br>  
>Setsuna wished that she had a few more details on Sailor Saturn. She  
<br>had been tempted to stop and observe the future, but the Sailor Pluto  
>of Crystal Tokyo had advised against it in the strongest possible  
<br>terms. For her to know the details of this future would risk a paradox  
>of horrific proportions. <br>  
>Setsuna's future self had even gone so far as to say that she was  
<br>caught by surprise by several events in the coming months when they had

>occurred to her. Such an admission threatened a paradox itself: if  
<br>Setsuna abused her powers and examined time, she would be  
changing the  
>facts that she had just told herself. Setsuna hated it when she  
forced <br>herself into these situations.  
><br>Michiru hopped out of the front seat and let Setsuna climb out  
of the  
>little two door that Haruka had driven tonight. While the tall woman  
<br>tidied her already neat clothes, Michiru pressed the final issue.  
"If  
>he is no threat to Sailor Saturn, should we do anything about him at  
<br>all?"  
><br>"Personally, I have no interest in letting a psychopath being an  
  
>advisor to our Princess' best friend. At this point there is no need  
<br>for direct action against him, but I will continue to... make  
  
>suggestions to Luna and Artemis. I suspect that they will be more  
<br>amicable to reason than Rei-san. I know that those two cats hold  
quite  
>a sway over the Inner Senshi and the Princess."<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Two days later, at the Hikawa shrine, Ranma sat opposite Rei with a  
<br>frown on his face.  
><br>"You know, Rei-san, I really think this idea stinks."  
><br>"I know Ranma, you've already told me that seventeen times."  
  
><br>"Eighteen, Rei-chan." Ami chipped in helpfully. "Remember, there  
was  
>that time yesterday too, when you were---"<br>  
>"I think he understands, Ami-chan."<br>  
>Ami opened her book again and buried her head in it. "Sorry."<br>  
  
>Casting his eyes around their audience, Ranma looked for a  
supportive <br>smile, or something that would indicate that he did  
not need to go  
>through with this. Nothing. All of Rei's friends were there, sitting  
<br>and watching. Watching him make a fool of himself.  
><br>"Go on, admit it, you just chose a fire reading because you know  
I've  
>never mastered it."<br>  
>'Damn right.' Thought Rei. Out loud she vigorously denied it. "No,  
of <br>course not, Ranma. It's just that you have as much Ki as two  
ordinary  
>people, you may even have more than I do. What I need is for you to  
<br>help me with power for this fire reading. I really want to be  
able to  
>show Usagi-chan some of her future. With your help, hopefully we'll  
be <br>able to."  
><br>'I don't believe it! I'm suppressing that much Ki, and she still  
thinks  
>I have more than two normal people?! How can this be?' Ranma let no  
<br>trace of his real concern colour his voice. "But, Rei-san! I  
won't even  
>be able to see what's going on if I'm meditating." <br>  
>'Right again'. Rei tried to force some semblance of concern into her  
<br>voice as she finished arranging her robes and sat before the  
sacred  
>fire. "I know, and I'm sorry about that, Ranma. But this could be  
<br>really important for Usagi-chan. You... you wouldn't want her to

miss

>out on some big opportunity, would you?"<br>

>"No! No, of course not. I... I just wish I could see what was happening <br>too."

><br>Placing her palms outwards by the fire, Rei focused herself.  
"Just

>meditate, Ranma. Please. I really appreciate what you're doing.  
Now... <br>Concentrate... Focus... Find your centre and we shall begin."

><br>As Ranma closed his eyes, the other Inner Senshi gathered closer. Rei

>had warned them that even if she could make the images in the sacred  
<br>fire strong enough for them to see, they would still be faint. In all

>likelihood, it would only be Rei that could see them. But she would be  
<br>able to get a better understanding of what she was looking at.

><br>The Vision Of Silence. She had first seen a faint image of impending

>doom months ago. There was a threat that was coming that would endanger  
<br>the entire world, and they were the ones to be facing it. For the

>longest time, she had despaired of ever seeing more detail on the  
<br>event. Now that her grandfather had taught Rei some power sharing

>techniques she could use with Ranma, she could use his power to see in  
<br>greater detail.

><br>She hoped.

><br>Entering her own meditative state, Rei looked at the fire. Deep into

>the fire. Deep into the sacred fire where the images of the past and  
<br>the future reside. "Oh, sacred fire---"

><br>Whoosh! With a roar, the flames leapt to roof height. In the flames,

>for all to see, was the image of a woman. A woman of surpassing beauty.  
<br>She had short-cropped black hair, and a smile that was so cute, so open

>and honest that it made her face light up. The smiling face stared out  
<br>of the fire at them, and her eyes seemed to twinkle at some unseen

>joke.<br>

>"Ranma! Ranma! Snap out of it Ranma!"<br>

>A few gentle taps to his cheeks managed to bring Ranma back from his  
<br>meditations. "What, we done already? But you hardly used any Ki."

><br>"Ranma, there was something wrong. I... I don't think the technique

>worked correctly. We had enough power... but the focus and control  
<br>wasn't there."

><br>Ami leaned forwards. She might not be a Shinto trainee like Rei, but

>she had a sneaking suspicion what had just happened. "Ranma, if I  
<br>describe a girl, could you tell me if you recognise her? Let's see...

>She was smiling, and she had big eyes, I think they might have been  
<br>brown. She had short black hair, and seemed so happy."

><br>"Hmm, could be Hotaru. Why?"

><br>"No, not Hotaru, besides Hotaru-chan's eyes are purple. Shorter hair,

>and she was definitely older. She almost looked... mischievous... I  
<br>don't know, something like that. It's because we saw her in the  
fire."

><br>"Ahh, that's probably Akane. My Akane... I always use her as my  
centre  
>for meditation. She always looked like that just after she poured  
<br>boiling water on me."

><br>Ami gulped. If pouring boiling water on her husband was Akane's  
idea of  
>fun, she was glad that Ranma was Rei's and Makoto's boyfriend, not  
<br>hers. Those sorts of party games were not to her taste. "She  
poured  
>boiling water on you?"<br>

>"Err, just forget I said that... OK? It sort of became a... a...  
joke, <br>yeah, a joke. After my father introduced us that way. Um,  
he was the  
>one that poured the boiling water on me first."<br>

>Ranma smiled in an unconvincing manner. Rei scowled at him, and the  
<br>rest of the girls gave a smile that was just as convincing as  
his.

><br>Rei asserted herself again. "All right, Ranma. Let's try that in  
a  
>different way then. This time, close your eyes and meditate. Rather  
<br>than you direct the energy into the fire, just let me have it.  
Leave  
>all of the control up to me. Just relax." Under her voice she also  
<br>whispered: "That way we won't have to see everything you want us  
to."

><br>Once again, they both meditated. This time when Rei had called  
to the  
>sacred fire, she reached out her hands and placed her palms on  
Ranma's. <br>"Relax and begin to let me take control."

><br>Ranma began to ease off. It was not easy, giving up control of  
his  
>inner energies. The only thing that made it possible was the fact  
that <br>he trusted Rei. She might be a tomboy, she might be angry a  
lot of the  
>time, but he trusted her implicitly. If she thought she was ready to  
<br>control Ki of his level, he would give her the opportunity.  
Surely if  
>she could not do a proper fire reading with her skills and his  
power, <br>then no-one could.

><br>All was quiet for a moment, then there was a massive blue flash,  
  
>knocking everyone over. When they managed to recover their feet, it  
was <br>to see Ranma sitting there serenely, while Rei shuddered  
slightly,  
>focusing more power than she ever expected. The sacred flame had  
<br>changed so that it looked less like a wood fire, and more like a  
blue  
>butane flame.<br>

>Ranma checked his Ki levels and frowned mentally. He had used more  
Ki <br>when he was fighting Cologne and he could have kept that up  
all day,  
>but he could feel Rei struggling to maintain control. Suddenly it  
<br>dawned on him: Rei did not realise his true reserves. Akane would  
have  
>called it an ego bigger than the whole world. He called it Ki  
refined <br>and nurtured for four centuries, three of those included  
the use of Ki



>as a martial arts attack. You got no precision - none of the finesse  
<br>needed for fire readings as a completely random example - but you got  
>buckets and buckets of power.<br>  
>Power that a Shinto Priestess would never be expecting. Shinto dealt  
in <br>subtlety, precision and accuracy. Combat usage dealt in great  
gouts of  
>raw ego; enough ego to break down a wall or force a hurricane. <br>  
  
>Easing back in some of his control, Ranma felt Rei calm down. After  
a <br>moment, she opened her eyes and looked worriedly at the blue  
flame.  
>Blue with the power of confidence. Dimly, as though seen underwater,  
<br>Rei could still see the image of Akane's face. Now it was just a  
  
>background, something that she could call the flames to hide.<br>  
  
>As the worried Senshi gathered around the pair, Rei took control and  
<br>steered the power. Focusing this much spiritual energy was a  
challenge,  
>but it was one that she knew she was up to. Mastering a vision like  
<br>this would give the Senshi an unbeatable advantage in their  
upcoming  
>fight. When she had first seen the Vision Of Silence, it was like a  
bad <br>dream: all you could remember when you awoke was the horror  
and none of  
>the important details.<br>  
>All that would change now, They had six people in the room, and of  
them <br>all, Ranma was the only one that was not able to see the  
Vision.  
>Displayed before them like a three dimensional, burning television,  
the <br>sacred flame showed them their future.  
><br>The Senshi were fighting. It was flashes of short skirts in  
bright  
>colours as they moved through a dark building. One fell, then  
another. <br>The Outer Senshi were there too, apparently struggling  
against a common  
>enemy. <br>  
>Everyone was in a large room, but it was a room filled with  
darkness, <br>indistinct and indecisive. All that could be seen in  
the room was a  
>woman: tall and regal, with very long, jet black hair. She was  
laughing <br>and holding up the Holy Grail. Even through the vision  
they could see  
>the power that came from the Grail, an obviously forbidden power as  
<br>they saw Sailor Moon cry out against its use.  
><br>Behind the woman a darkness arose. A darkness reaching out,  
sending its  
>tentacles of power into our world. A world incapacitated, as  
one-by-one <br>the Senshi were shown lying motionless, possibly dead;  
certainly  
>wounded.<br>  
>The vision shifted once more, and it was a woman, a girl really,  
<br>wearing the short sailor style of the Senshi, but it was a Senshi  
that  
>none of them recognised. A Senshi in dark and forbidding colours.  
The <br>Vision held still for a moment, focused on the single image  
of Sailor  
>Moon and this new Senshi. Both held the Grail, and neither looked  
<br>happy; it was impossible to tell if Moon was receiving the Grail

or  
>fighting for it.<br>  
>The new Senshi's eyes glittered with the dedication of someone willing <br>to kill... and willing to die.  
><br>Now they are in the darkness. It is all around, just a single source of  
>red light is the evil that sits at its heart. The scene is a  
<br>frightening tableaux: the dark Senshi holding Saturn Knight's weapon  
>prepared to strike, a weapon even more outsized on her than on Saturn <br>Knight. At her feet Sailor Moon can be seen. She is beaten and  
>battered, her clothes torn from a losing fight.<br>  
>As the large weapon drops, the vision fades. All that remains is Sailor <br>Moon's voice, and another voice in the background... The first sound of  
>the entire vision, it starts strongly, then fades, vanishing into a  
<br>world consuming Silence.  
><br>"Sailor Saturn! No! There must be another way! Don't do it! We want to  
>help you..."<br>"DEATH... REBORN...."  
><br>Rei collapses sideways as the vision ends, the sacred flame returning  
>to a normal fire. In an instant she was surrounded by the other girls, <br>and Ami began to pat her hand, as she groggily began to sit up.  
><br>Usagi threw her arms around Rei's neck and began to sob onto her  
  
>shoulder. "Oh, Rei-chan. That was so scary! And you fell over! And I  
<br>was so worried about you! And what are we going to do?"  
  
><br>Rei held her aching head and wondered how someone Usagi's size could  
>have big enough lungs to say all that in the one breath. Forcing the  
<br>pounding in her skull to subside for a moment, Rei looked across the  
>fire.<br>  
>"Ranma..."<br>  
>He was still in a lotus position, and only just beginning to return to <br>consciousness. "Wow. Rei-san, I'm really impressed. A bit rough at the  
>start, but you did a great job on the control. You get anything  
<br>useful?"  
><br>Actually Ranma was more than just impressed. In what felt like only  
>minutes, Rei had managed to drain over half his Ki. Sure, he had let  
<br>her, but she was the one that had created the channel for the power. He  
>wondered if she realised just how much spiritual energy she had  
<br>channelled? He'd have to drop by Cologne's tonight; a discharge like  
>that should have been able to be felt for a mile around, if you knew  
<br>what to look for.  
><br>A little bit weakly, Rei nodded her head. "Thanks, Ranma. I couldn't  
>have done it without you."<br>  
>"Hey, well, you asked for the best and you got him. So, I mean, of  
<br>course even a tomboy like you could do it with someone like me to  
  
>help."<br>

>Minako looked up at Ranma. Sure he was cute, but that did not mean he  
<br>could talk to Rei like that. "Ranma! Can't you say something nice for  
>once?"<br>  
>"Sure I can: Rei-san, those temple clothes really suit you. I mean,  
<br>with a skirt that big, it can even hide the size of your big thighs.  
>And the shirt too, no-one can tell how flat---" The sound of one of her  
<br>sandals bouncing off his head cut short his 'compliment'.

><br>"What? What did I say?"  
><br>Ami shook her head. "If you don't know now, you'll never know. Not even  
>if you live to be a hundred years old."<br>  
>"You got that right. So, you gunna tell me what you saw?"<br>

>Getting to her feet, Rei retrieved her sandal and started to lead  
<br>everyone back into the courtyard. The last thing she wanted to do was  
>to tell him what they had seen. When she had seen only fleeting  
<br>glimpses of the Vision it had been bad enough. Now that she had seen  
>what may come to pass, it was worse than ever. Sailor Pluto had warned  
<br>them that Sailor Saturn could be dangerous. Now they saw what could  
>happen if this did not improve, if they could not contact Sailor Saturn  
<br>and gain her trust.  
><br>"I'm sorry, Ranma. It was something personal for Usagi-chan. You... you  
>don't mind if we keep it private... do you?"<br>  
>Ranma affectionately gave Usagi's hair a quick ruffling. "Nah, I can  
<br>live without the sordid details of Usagi-chan's love life. Just so long  
>as it wasn't the end of the world or something."<br>  
>"N-No... Not at all, nothing like that... Really!" 'At least,' Rei  
<br>thought. 'It won't be the end of the world if we do things right.'  
><br>They were all on the front steps to the shrine talking, and Ranma knew  
>that he should be going home, letting Usagi and her friends talk about  
<br>what they had seen in the fire. 'Probably the boy she's going to marry,  
>or something else that girls gossip about.' Ranma thought. He could see  
<br>in Rei's face the fact that she wanted him to leave: she desperately  
>wanted to talk to Usagi and her friends but after receiving his help,  
<br>it would be unforgivably impolite to rush him away.

><br>He happened to be looking at Rei's eyes when he first felt it and he  
>could tell instantly that she could feel the presence of evil in the  
<br>air. Her brows lowered slightly, and he could see her lips thin as she  
>concentrated. As one they turned to look down the street, searching for  
<br>whatever person was powerful enough to attract their attention, moment  
>later he could feel Minako do the same, followed by the other girls.  
<br>  
>It did not take much watching until they were able to see the cause of  
<br>their premonition: Witch Mimete. She was running down a

street,  
>laughing in a most irritating manner as she dodged in and out  
between <br>people.  
><br>Ranma cursed. 'Here I am with a group of defenceless school  
girls, and  
>there goes another one of those evil Witches! Damn it! I need to be  
<br>down there, maybe I can stop her before she or those impostors  
try and  
>take someone else's Heart Crystal. Not only that, but Sailor Mars is  
<br>sure to show up any moment, and there no way I can change with  
Rei-san  
>or her friends about.'  
>Looking at the nervous way the girls were fidgeting and looking at  
him, <br>Ranma reached the only possibly conclusion. "Don't worry,  
I'll keep her  
>busy until the Sailor girls arrive. Takuhi! Come forth and guard  
these <br>girls!"  
><br>With a flourish, Ranma picked off the top of his staff,  
releasing  
>Takuhi in a brilliant flare of light. The massive bird spirit - the  
<br>size of a house when his wings were spread - soared free of its  
home  
>and circled. With a deafening cry, Takuhi swooped down and over flew  
<br>the girls, counting them and watching them like a mother hen  
protects  
>her chicks.<br>  
>"Ranma, wait!"<br>  
>"I can't wait, Rei-san. Don't worry Takuhi will keep you safe."<br>

>Running down the street, Ranma hated that lie. Against ordinary  
people, <br>sure Takuhi could keep them safe. People with guns could  
hurt him, and  
>people like the Witches 5 or those fake Sailor girls would have him  
for <br>breakfast. Ranma's only hope was to get to the Witch first  
and keep her  
>busy until the Senshi arrived. <br>  
>He was under no illusions about his ability to beat her in a fight.  
He <br>had watched the Sailors go toe-to-toe against her in the past,  
and knew  
>that they were outclassed, winning only because of their dedication,  
<br>determination and teamwork. Ranma knew he was the best martial  
artist  
>there was, but sometimes being the best just isn't good enough. <br>

>As he raced down the street and out of his friend's sight, he  
prepared <br>an attack. Ki was too draining to use at this great a  
range, and he  
>would need all of that just to stay alive. Most of his magic attacks  
<br>were too broad and indiscriminate. Actually, the only attack he  
knew  
>that he could be confident of using with any chance of success would  
<br>also kill thousands of innocent people. A city is no place for  
using  
>the Dragon Slave, no matter what Lina had tried to teach him.<br>

>Finally he spotted her as she moved through a mall. To all  
appearances, <br>she was ogling the boys there, and seemed to be  
selecting Heart  
>Crystals purely on the basis of how nice they looked. 'Damn, she's  
<br>definitely gunna want mine!'

><br>Firing his Elemenkia Lance, Ranma caught her attention. It might not be  
>as potent as a Mars Fire Soul or the Jupiter Thunder Crash, but it  
<br>would guarantee her full attention.  
><br>Back at the temple, Usagi had reached for her locket as soon as Ranma  
>was out of sight. Instantly Rei slapped her hand away, and pointed at  
<br>Takuhi who was sitting on the ground, watching both them and the  
the  
>deserted streets intently. "No! You can't. If you transform now, Takuhi  
<br>will know, and he'll tell Ranma and Hotaru everything."

><br>"W-well what are we going to do?"  
><br>"I don't know, perhaps we can go into the temple, he probably can't  
>follow us there..."<br>  
>"Everyone! Look!"<br>  
>Ami pointed to the base of the stairs where Takuhi sat. In the shadows,  
<br>some tall forms moved. Suddenly brilliant green water streamed from one  
>of them, blasting into the spirit bird. Takuhi took flight instantly,  
<br>circling around to dive bomb Sailor Pluto who was now standing openly  
>in the middle of the street.<br>  
>It was a perfectly understandable reaction really. The Outers were  
<br>chasing Mimete, and they come across the Inner Senshi, all standing  
>under the watchful eyes of some sort of giant bird monster. What were  
<br>they supposed to think?  
><br>As one, the Inner Senshi ran down, screaming for them to stop. Before  
>they could get to the other group, Takuhi finished his loop and dive  
<br>bombed Sailor Pluto. His one clawed foot extended and ready to gouge  
her to death for her ally's unprovoked attack. <br>  
>Despite the distance between them, they could all hear Sailor Pluto's  
<br>whispered words. Every other Senshi screamed their attack names but for  
>some reason Sailor Pluto's attack was only ever given at a whisper...<br>  
>"Dead Scream."<br>  
>A fraction of a second before she became bird food, a glowing purple  
<br>sphere formed between her and the spirit creature. Takuhi collided with  
>the attack full force, smashing into it so hard that it forced Sailor  
<br>Pluto back a step, even as the Dead Scream did it's work.

><br>When the girls arrived it was all over. Sailor Uranus gave the corpse a  
>nudge with her boot, snorting at an fearsome appearing adversary that  
<br>seemed all show and no substance. All that remained of Takuhi was a  
>crushed looking bird form, no larger than an eagle or large goose.  
<br>  
>"No..." Rei whispered. <br>  
>Usagi turned on Sailor Pluto. "Why did you attack it? Takuhi was  
<br>supposed to be protecting us. He wasn't doing you any harm."

><br>Sailor Pluto did not even turn back, but Uranus gave her a scolding

>glance before she headed off to join her friends and they followed  
<br>Mimete. "You're supposed to be defending others, not sitting her  
under  
>the wing of some demon bird. We rescued you so that you can rescue  
<br>others, now get moving."  
><br>"But Takuhi was Hotaru's pet; you didn't have to kill him. We  
could  
>have left by another way."<br>  
>"If she associates with monsters like this, she deserves what she  
gets. <br>People are being attacked out there, so sacrifices must be  
made... I  
>don't have time to stand around and talk, and neither do you."<br>

>As Sailor Uranus ran off, a horror struck Ami kneeled down by the  
<br>large, and very dead bird. Gently she brushed the feathers back  
from  
>his almost human face then turned to the others. "Go and help Ranma.  
<br>I'll take Takuhi up to the Shrine, then I'll meet you. Make sure  
that  
>you stop her. Don't let this be in vain."<br>  
>The Senshi did arrive in time. They also saved a number of innocent  
<br>people, including a badly beaten Ranma. If not for their timely  
  
>arrival, Witch Mimete may have had time to steal his Heart Crystal  
too. <br>It was tribute enough that he survived that long against  
her, providing  
>the time they needed to arrive.<br>  
>All of their efforts still felt insufficient when Ranma returned to  
the <br>shrine. The Senshi had beaten him back and were there to help  
with the  
>bad news. He took one look at the caved in chest of his long time  
<br>companion and collapsed to his knees, crying and holding the  
bird.  
><br>Rei tentatively reached out put a hand on his shoulder.  
"Ranma... I...  
>I'm sorry..."<br>  
>Ranma looked up at her, his face full of pain. Even as she watched,  
<br>his features smoothed and he locked it all away behind his iron  
  
>control. "It hurts Rei-san. It hurts."<br>  
>Silently, Ranma stood and took the bird into his arms. He left the  
<br>staff on the floor. It was useless now, just another lump of wood  
as  
>far as he was concerned. In the silence, a single drop of blood came  
<br>out of Takuhi's mouth, flowed down its cheek, and landed with an  
  
>audible splash on the floor.<br>  
>Ranma looked down at Rei. He put a hand on her shoulder. "At least  
<br>you're safe... I'm going to find out who did this, and then there  
will  
>be hell to pay.<br>  
>-----<br>End Of Chapter.  
><br>  
><br>  
><br>

>The characters contained within this story are owned by Takahashi  
<br>Rumiko and Takeuchi Naoko. No infringement of copyright is  
intended.

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current <br>author.

><br>Thanks to my pre-readers:

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><br>

>This is a crossover between Ranma 12 and Sailor Moon. To make the  
two

>stories fit together the way I wanted, I needed to shuffle the dates  
at <br>which a few things occur within the main timeline of Sailor  
Moon. I bow

>my head in shame: please forgive.<br>

>Die hard fans of Ranma may also notice a very subtle change to its  
<br>story timeline...

><br>This story is dedicated to the letters M and M the numbers i and  
e.

><br>

>Visit my website at<br>dzillman@ozemail.com.au

><http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>

> \_\_\_\_\_<br> / \

> | Destiny's Child |<br> \ \_\_\_\_\_/

><br>

><br>What has gone before:

>While on a training trip with his father during the early 1600s,  
Ranma <br>fell into the spring of the drowned young girl.

Unfortunately, his

>curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he  
<br>has spent most of his time in his cursed form. Not only that, but

>because the spring was drowned young girl, he turns into a 12 year  
old <br>girl who never ages.

><br>In the present...

>Ranma has received a partial cure for his curse by the spirit entity  
<br>called Mistress 9. She will eventually take his girl's body,  
freeing

>him entirely, so now he poses as Tomoe Hotaru. Unfortunately, he now  
<br>seems to have a few problems with the ladies, since he is  
inadvertently

>engaged to Hino Rei (he's taking lessons in Shinto), his old buddy  
<br>Ucchan, and the friendly Amazon Shampoo. That doesn't even start  
to

>include Mako-chan, or the fact that two of his best friends are only  
<br>three foot tall: Cologne and Chibi-Usa.

><br>Ranma's problems are increasing daily. He now remembers being  
Saturn

>Knight, a borderline psychotic noble from the Moon Kingdom... too  
bad <br>that Saturn Knight and Sailor Mars are falling for each  
other. Not only

>that, but Saturn Knight, Ranma, and Hotaru (as different persona)  
have <br>all been having problems with the Outer Senshi.

><br>-----

>Memories<br>-----

><br>His fiery Sailor Mars had just delivered another lovely attack  
against

>the forces of darkness and evil. Leaning contentedly against a wall,  
<br>obsured by darkness, Saturn Knight sighed. She looked so lovely,  
a  
>moving tribute to the ultimate sculpture. Just watching her was a  
<br>pleasure in itself. Poetry in motion, the very definition of a  
pretty  
>soldier.<br>  
>He had held her hand earlier. It was not the first time that he had  
<br>touched her, but it was the longest. Even though they had both  
arrived  
>on the scene of a Daimon attack, he stole a few moments of her time  
to <br>be with her. He gave her an evening dress today, she might  
never wear  
>it in public since they still hid their real identities from the  
world <br>and each other, but he knew she liked it. He cast an eye  
over where it  
>sat, out of danger from her battle. No-one would be able to steal it  
<br>while it was under his observation.  
><br>Her compatriots were doing better today. She was a warrior, and  
he  
>respected her fight and her ability to defend herself, but it hurt  
his <br>heart every time she was attacked. At least today things  
seemed to be  
>going well.<br>  
>Things were going so well in fact that the heroines could spare  
someone <br>to come and visit him; aware of his environment, Ranma  
could feel  
>someone climbing the side of the building. Sparing the man a quick  
<br>glance he returned to his vigil of Sailor Mars. It was only  
Tuxedo  
>Mask. He watched over Queen Serenity in the same way that he watched  
<br>over Sailor Mars. Saturn Knight gave a chuckle. It amused him no  
end  
>that the mighty Queen of the Moon Kingdom needed constant help,  
while <br>his warrior maiden was able to defend herself against the  
best that her  
>enemies could do.<br>  
>"Can you wait for a time? We would like to speak to you."<br>  
  
>Saturn Knight did not even turn his head. There was no point: he  
could <br>sense where Tuxedo Kamen was, and since they both wore  
masks, there was  
>no need to see his face.<br>  
>"No."<br>  
>"Please. Saturn Knight, we need to discuss what is happening with  
you. <br>You could be of great assistance to us."  
><br>"No. I have no interest in helping you."  
><br>"Please, Sailor Moon and Sailor Mars have both asked."  
  
><br>"It is not Sailor Mars that wishes to speak to me. She would  
have asked  
>me when we were together."<br>  
>"Does that mean you will be here?"<br>  
>"I will talk with the Queen alone. Because she and Sailor Mars wish  
<br>it."  
><br>Tuxedo Kamen took that as consent. He had no choice really,  
Sailor Moon  
>was in trouble and needed his help. Again.<br>  
>The battle ended in another partial victory. They had managed to  
defend <br>the innocent people who had been attacked, and they had



stopped the

>Daimon, but the evil Witch that was the cause of all of their  
<br>difficulties had escaped. There would be a time when all the  
forces of

>evil would be defeated, and he would be there on that day watching  
<br>their victory.

><br>On the other hand, it seemed as though Tuxedo Kamen had hearing

>difficulty. It was not just the Queen that was approaching, but all  
of <br>the warriors. With a soft sigh, Saturn Knight dropped from the  
building

>and deliberately began to walk away from the assembly. He kept pace  
<br>with the group as they approached. When they stopped, so did he.

><br>Listening to the distant mummers of their whispering, Saturn  
Knight

>waited. After a time the Queen stepped forwards, leaving the rest of  
<br>the group. She looked nervous, as did the other Sailor girls and  
her

>guardian. The only one that did not look nervous was Sailor Mars.  
She <br>just looked irritated with her Queen.

><br>Standing still, Saturn Knight waited until the small figure of  
Queen

>Serenity stood beside him. Sketching a brief bow, he indicated that  
<br>they should move on. Not everything he said to her did he want  
his

>Sailor Mars to hear.<br>

>"Saturn Knight... How much do you remember of the Moon Kingdom? Most  
of <br>us have had memory problems since our reincarnation."

><br>"I remember most things. My memories are clearer when I summon  
my

>costume and the Silence Glaive... Over time the memories are  
filtering <br>back into my normal self."

><br>The Queen nodded. "Tuxedo Kamen had the same problem. When we  
first met

>him, he didn't even remember being Tuxedo Kamen when he returned to  
<br>being Ma... When he changed back to normal."

><br>A short laugh. "Things are not that bad. They are just...  
clearer for

>me now. What did you wish to ask me, my Queen?"<br>

>"Why do you call me Queen? My name is Sailor Moon."<br>

>"There is no Sailor Moon."<br>

>The Queen seemed very upset at that idea. "There is! There is! I'm  
<br>Sailor Moon!"

><br>Saturn Knight would have given her a questioning glance at that,  
but

>there was no use with the mask on. "Do you remember your  
mother?"<br>

>"Yes... She was Queen Serenity. She died to stop Beryl from  
conquering <br>the Moon Kingdom. I remember that it was her that sent  
us all into the

>future."<br>

>"So the Queen is dead. Long live the Queen. There is no Sailor  
Moon."<br>

>"But... But I'm the pretty soldier Sailor Moon! I'm not ready to be  
<br>Queen yet! I don't even have a Kingdom. Besides, what about  
Sailor

>Chibi Moon? If I'm Queen, doesn't that make her Sailor Moon?"<br>

>"It does not matter if you are ready yet. You must grow into your role, <br>because the world needs you. As for Chibi Moon, she is just that. When  
>she is ready to assume the full mantle of her powers, then we shall  
<br>again have a Sailor Moon."  
><br>She pondered on that for a moment. Perhaps sensing how long they had  
>been talking, she gave a small wave to her friends. When she turned  
<br>back to him, he was still standing there, his sea blue eyes  
staring at  
>her as though he had all the time in the world.<br>  
>"What I really needed to know is if there is anything you can do to  
<br>help us. Do you know anything? Can you help us fight?"

><br>Saturn Knight looked away. "I remember your mother helping me in the  
the  
>days of the Moon Kingdom. I gave her my loyalty for that, I did not  
<br>give my support. I will always be here watching. If things are  
bad  
>enough, if Sailor Mars is truly threatened. I will help. You may not  
<br>like the form of my help, but I will be there."  
><br>"That's it? There's nothing else? B-But what about Sailor  
Saturn?"  
><br>"What about Sailor Saturn?"  
><br>"Can you tell us about her? When will she awaken? Who is she?  
What was  
>she like when you knew her?"<br>  
>Saturn Knight placed a hand against his head as though in some pain.  
<br>"I... I do not know any Sailor Saturn. I remember you, and your

>compatriots, but beyond that... there is a gap. I remember a girl  
with <br>black hair, with care in her eyes... But I do not remember  
any Sailor  
>Saturn."<br>  
>The Queen stopped dead in her tracks. "You don't remember Sailor  
<br>Saturn? But... But Luna told us all about you and her. It was so

>tragic."<br>  
>"The cat lies. They all do. They were all out to get me... To get  
us... <br>I... I can't remember... It hurts..."  
><br>His Queen placed her hand on his arm. "It's OK. Don't try and  
remember  
>if it hurts. It will all come back in time. I still keep remembering  
<br>things all the time."  
><br>He gave the small girl a tentative smile. It worried him how he  
could  
>not remember these details. All he could remember were broken dreams  
<br>that he had when he reverted to his normal self. When he slept  
they  
>were detailed, but when he awoke, all he could remember was the love  
<br>and the loss that he felt. Something was missing in his life, as  
though  
>it was still asleep.<br>  
>Looking down at his Queen, he decided to take her into his  
confidence <br>on a most grave matter. "Long ago, I was trained in  
the arts of magic  
>by a sorceress named Lina Inverse. You will never find her, she has  
<br>been dead a long time, and most people never even knew she  
existed.  
>"Lina-sama taught me many wonderful things, but of the things too

<br>dangerous to teach me was the location of a powerful magical device  
>that her people created a hundred thousand years in the past.<br>"A device so powerful, and so dangerous that it was used once to save  
  
>the entire galaxy, and then sealed away... never to be used again.<br>"Lina-sama did teach me to detect its usage. And I have felt it. Queen  
>Serenity, I tell you now, someone has their hands upon a device so  
<br>powerful and so dangerous that even its creators feared to destroy it,  
>so they hid it away. Safe from human use."<br>  
>Saturn Knight looked down at his Queen. "Someone has access to the  
<br>Gates Of Time. I shall find them, and I shall stop them. There is no-  
>one that should have access to that power. Not even me."<br>  
>With that he leapt to the top of a house and began to sprint into the  
<br>distance, quickly becoming invisible to the ground based Senshi.  
><br>The Sailor Senshi arrived moments after his departure and stood around  
>their leader. Sailor Moon was delicately nibbling on one gloved finger <br>as she tried to think about what she should do.  
  
><br>"Umm... Sailor Mars... You know how you said that Saturn Knight was  
>perfectly stable? Well, I think we had better give Sailor Pluto a  
<br>call... He seems to have a little problem with her time travelling."  
><br>Then her eyes travelled down, ending up on the small figure of Sailor  
>Chibi Moon who had joined them that day. A girl sent there from the  
<br>future. She did not care how good his motives may be, if he ends up  
>threatening her daughter, she would show him just how powerful Sailor  
<br>Moon could be in defence of the ones she loved.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Ranma pushed open the door and walked inside.  
><br>Ukyo could tell that it was bad right from the start. He had walked in.  
>Ranma never walked anywhere. He ran, he jumped, he sauntered, he  
<br>strutted, he was even known to dance along if he was in a particularly  
>good mood. Ranma never just walked.<br>  
>Ukyo took a quick look at her three customers and decided that she had  
<br>some time to spare. Grabbing the batter container, she poured a  
>generous helping onto the griddle. "Hey, Ranchan. The usual?"<br>  
  
>From the grin he gave her Ukyo knew things were not as bad as they had  
<br>first seemed. Anyone that can give a grin so full of mischief like that  
>cannot be too troubled. Even before he nodded, Ukyo was grabbing the  
<br>ingredients for her 'Ranchan Special'. No-one else got an Okonomiyaki  
>like he did. Sure, everyone got food better than anywhere else in the  
<br>world, Ranma got the best of the best... by the best.  
  
><br>She watched her fiancée slide onto one of the bar-stools, he seemed

>rather down in the dumps, but not the way he usually got after a fight <br>with Rei. Watching as he fiddled with a menu on the counter, she tried  
>to figure out what was the matter. Let's see... he was not actually <br>reading the menu; she did not think he had ever read the menu. She just  
>made him what she knew he wanted. Now she knew he was a bit tense, he <br>only ever played with things when he was tense.  
><br>He wasn't angry though, Ukyo thought as she tossed a few prawns onto  
>the culinary masterpiece. She'd seen him angry a few times, and she <br>could swear that he almost glowed with radiated anger. If he'd had a  
>real fight with Rei, she knew he would be in here pacing around and <br>cursing all of the tomboys in the world. Something was bothering him,  
>but she couldn't figure out what.<br>  
>Smiling her cutest smile, Ukyo tossed the food onto a plate and held it <br>in front of him. "One Ranchan Special ready to eat."

><br>The smile on his face spread. Nothing could make him smile like her  
>food could. "Uh-uh. If you want this, you've got to tell me what's <br>bothering you."  
><br>The challenging smile on her face faded somewhat when the Okonomiyaki  
>vanished off the plate, faster than her eyes could even see. Instantly <br>she looked right at him, and her mouth fell open. In the time it took  
>her to blink once, Ranma had taken the food off the plate and managed <br>to shove half of the extra large size Okonomiyaki down his throat.  
><br>Currently, his mouth was open amazingly wide as he tentatively tried to  
>force the last morsel inside. It was an effort however, and too much <br>for him to achieve with the same lightning fast speed he had just  
>shown. Ukyo waved her spatula at him and silently congratulated herself <br>on making it just that bit bigger this time. If it had been a normal  
>size, she would never have seen it go.<br>  
>"Now, now, Ranma. That's no way to treat fine food like that. You <br>should savour it. Appreciate it."  
><br>"Mah mamm ma mememafunfunf."  
><br>Wiping the bench she just raised an eyebrow and waited.

><br>"Gulp! I am appreciating it!"  
><br>"All right, Ranchan. You've had my Okonomiyaki, now spill the beans.  
>You can tell your cute fiancée what's the matter."<br>  
>Ranma leaned against the counter, cradling his chin in his hands. "Ahh, <br>it's just been a rough couple of days, Ucchan. I'd rather not talk  
>about it, OK?"<br>  
>"Come on, Ranchan. You've got to learn to talk to people and not hold <br>it all in. Hey, how long have we been friends and you never even told  
>me you were married?" Ukyo hoped he would get the hint and spill the <br>beans about Akane. It had hit her pretty hard the other day when she  
she

>had found out that Ranma not only had been married, but the fact that <br>everyone seemed to know about it other than her.

><br>"Aww, Ucchan..."

><br>"Don't 'aww, Ucchan' me! Come on, you've always been able to talk to me

>before. How many times have you been in here complaining that your <br>tomboy fiancée doesn't understand you? You can talk to me. You don't

>need to keep secrets, you can trust me."<br>

>The mere mention that Ranma might have secrets perked him up slightly. <br>The thought of telling old buddy Ucchan some of the secrets he knew

>brought a smile to his face. His smile faded again when he remembered <br>some of the not so secret things that were weighing on him.

><br>"All right, all right. Yesterday was about the worst day I can remember

>for ages. First off, two days ago was Akane and my anniversary. I <br>always light a candle for her. It's... it's a day I always spend alone.

>"Yesterday, my oldest friend died. You never met Takuhi, but he was the <br>sweetest little spirit you ever met. Rei and her friends were attacked

>by someone. I don't know who yet, but Takuhi was there to protect them. <br>They killed him, Ucchan. His poor little chest was caved in, and his

>feathers were all burnt."<br>

>Watching her fiancée stifle a snuffle, Ukyo wondered at who this Takuhi <br>was. She was beginning to get the feeling that the more she knew about

>Ranma, the more she needed to know. Before she could ask him to <br>elaborate further, he continued.

><br>"The today, just five minutes ago. I'm there yelling at Rei-san, she's

>yelling back. You know, we're getting a real good rhythm going.

<br>Suddenly she goes all quiet and then she's chasing me away. Snap, just

>like that. One minute were walking down the street insulting each <br>other, and the next thing she says she's got to go, that she can't be

>with me now. What's wrong with her?"<br>

>Ukyo sighed and sat back on her stool. "Only you could think that was <br>weird. Think about it, Ranchan. You probably managed to say something

>that really offended her. Haven't you heard of a brush-off? She <br>probably got so angry with you, she didn't even want to speak to you,

>let alone keep arguing."<br>

>"Really?"<br>

>Ukyo saw her chance. Maybe she could make him realise just how badly he <br>and Rei actually were for each other. "Sure. Look at it this way,

>whenever she insults you, you seem to come here and moan about it.

<br>She's probably just had enough. Heck, at the moment, she probably

>doesn't even want to know you."<br>

>"What? That uncute tomboy? Why should she be upset? All I said was that <br>she looked good in the samurai outfit she wore at the start of the

>party. The Hakama skirt pants hid her thick legs, and the bamboo armour <br>meant that you couldn't see how of a tomboy the rest of her was. Why  
>would she be upset at the truth?"<br>  
>Ukyo rubbed her face in her hands. How thick could the boy be? "It's  
<br>pretty obvious, Ranma. First, no girl likes those sorts of insults.  
>Second, she'd stopped wearing her costume by the time you got to the  
<br>party. She must have thought that you meant she looked better when you  
>couldn't see her at all."<br>  
>"You really think that would upset her?"<br>  
>Ukyo had reached the limit of her endurance. Even if the insults  
<br>weren't levelled at her, girls needed to stick together. She had just  
>grabbed her battle spatula to knock some sense into his thick skull  
<br>when someone smashed through the front wall of her shop.

><br>It was a smallish woman. She had yellow frizzy hair, and a puffy red  
>skirt; a skirt that only covered as much as the Sailor Senshi's skirts <br>did. Having someone go through the glass window in your restaurant is  
>not a totally unknown occurrence. Usually it's someone drunk going the  
<br>other way as part of a brawl.  
><br>It was even more surprising since she seemed to have been driven

>through the window by some sort of magical attack and to Ranma's  
<br>experienced senses, she fairly reeked of magic. This magic did not

>surprise him too much when he got a decent look at her: Witch Mimete.<br>

>Revenge had to wait, Ranma needed to get Ucchan to safety. Pulling Ukyo <br>to the ground behind the counter, Ranma counted his blessings: they

>were the only people in the restaurant at the time. All of Ukyo's other <br>customers had finished eating and left while they were talking. The

>second blessing was his biggest: outside the shattered window, he could <br>hear the sounds of Queen Serenity and her pretty soldiers. The cavalry

>had arrived.<br>

>Sticking his head over the top of the counter, Ranma was just in time <br>to see Witch Mimete fire her Charm Buster staff at someone out of his

>sight. From close personal experience, Ranma knew how painful that was. <br>Even at his best he could not defeat someone as magically powerful as

>Mimete. Even the Sailor Girls had a hard time fighting her, and as a <br>group they were considerably stronger than he was.

><br>"Come on, Ucchan. We've got to get you out of here!"

><br>Picking Ucchan up, he bodily thrust her towards the back door. Just as

>he released her, one of the impostor Sailor girl's water attack blasted <br>through the front of the Okonomiyaki shop. Tearing another large chunk

>from the front wall, Ranma watched in stunned horror as the Witch <br>dodged it. Bracing his arms in the moments he had, Ranma raised his

>aura shield and cringed as he was struck.<br>  
>Blasted across the room by the Deep Submerge, Hotaru slowly  
struggled <br>to her feet, every bone in her body aching. It was bad  
enough to take  
>that sort of abuse when you were prepared. If he had received a  
<br>moment's less warning, they would have been needing a new Saturn

>Knight. Trying to clear the fog from her eyes, she realised that it  
was <br>the Mercury Bubble Burst that prevented her from seeing  
anything.

><br>Stumbling through the fog, Hotaru listened for a voice telling  
her that

>Ukyo was all right. Eventually she heard Ukyo calling for her. By  
the <br>muffled sounds, Ranma thought - and hoped - she was outside.  
If Witch

>Mimete was in the building, and the impostors were outside, there  
was <br>no way to tell who would get attacked. Ranma knew that if an  
errant

>attack struck Ukyo, she would almost certainly be hospitalised. She  
<br>might be a high calibre martial artist, but her level just could  
not

>protect against the fearsome magical energies people were wielding  
<br>here.

><br>Ranma had just demolished a chair - it leapt out and attacked  
her,

>honestly - when she heard ominous sounds from outside.<br>

>Michiru: "She's still in there!"<br>

>Haruka: "Why did you stick the fog up, Mercury? Well never find her  
<br>now!"

><br>Sailor Mercury: "But I---"

><br>Michiru: "We've got to catch her! We can't let her escape!"

><br>Haruka: "Right! WORLD SHAKING!"

><br>And it did shake. Everything shook. The walls shook, the floor  
shook,

>and the ceiling began to make very ominous creaking noises.<br>

>Sprinting as well as she could in the quaking, fog covered  
restaurant, <br>Hotaru tried to force her small body past chairs and  
tables trying to

>get outside. Somewhere nearby she heard Mimete scream, and then the  
<br>roof fell in. Bricks, mortar, wooden beams and all manner of  
materials

>collapsed down as the small building Ukyo owned was abruptly  
levelled.<br>

>Her life endangered. Ukyo almost killed by their reckless actions.  
<br>Ucchan's destroyed. Her - pretty little Hotaru - buried in  
building

>rubble. Her curse almost revealed to everyone. After the last couple  
of <br>days, her fuse was gone. They had finally pushed her too far.  
Maybe the

>next time she saw them, she would be calmer, but now... now she  
wanted <br>blood.

><br>Releasing her Ki, Hotaru started to glow like the firefly she  
was

>named. With a blast, she knocked the debris off her self. Not even  
<br>bothering to brush the dust from her too-large clothes, she  
called 'RAY

>WING' and took to the air.<br>

>Like a blue burning ball, Hotaru brought her hands together and  
<br>prepared a Ki strike. Any of four targets. She didn't care. Any  
of  
>them. Michiru, Setsuna, Haruka or Mimete. Let her lay eyes on them  
and <br>they would really begin to appreciate just how powerful the  
human  
>spirit was compared to mere magic. <br>  
>There they were! Down the street, three or four blocks, the Witch  
was <br>engaging in a running battle against the three impostors and  
the Sailor  
>girls. 'How did they get so far? Damn, those collapsing beams must  
have <br>hit me harder than I thought. No matter. The Witch looks  
like she'll  
>escape this time, but I'm going to slow one of those impostors and  
take <br>her down permanently!'  
><br>"MOKO TAKABISHA!"  
><br>The Ki blast flew straight and true, burning deep into Michiru's  
calf,  
>sending the girl tumbling to the ground. With a cry of success,  
Hotaru <br>began to fly closer. Even Haruka had stopped running after  
Mimete to  
>try and help her friend after the unexpected attack. Hotaru did not  
<br>know if she could beat the two of them alone, but hopefully the  
real  
>Sailors would help her, and finally rid themselves of the menace  
they <br>presented.  
><br>What Hotaru really wanted was to cut loose. It was possible that  
they  
>could survive a Dragon Slave (Lina had been able to), but it was  
<br>unlikely. In any event, they would have been too weak to defend  
  
>themselves. The only drawback: lots and lots of other people would  
die <br>if she cast it here. Her most potent attack, and it was  
useless.  
><br>The girls were looking around now, trying to find who attacked  
them,  
>and that gave Hotaru precious time to prepare. She was almost ready  
to <br>launch an oversized fireball and singe them both when she  
heard cries  
>from beneath her. Looking down from three stories high at the  
crushed <br>remains of Ucchan's, she could see the distressed owner.  
Coated in dust  
>and limping, Ukyo was walking across the rubble calling Ranma's  
name. <br>Every now and again, she tried to move one of the heavy  
pieces of  
>wreckage, but to no avail. <br>  
>Casting a glance between the fake Sailors - who where now recovering  
- <br>and her friend, Hotaru decided where her priorities lay. She  
could get  
>revenge some other time. Now Ukyo looked like she had just lost  
another <br>friend. If she thought Ranma had died, as well as Kikyo,  
she may never  
>recover.<br>  
>Quenching her Ki, Ranma dropped three stories to land softly on the  
<br>ground. Killing the flight spell, she saw a competitor's snack  
shop and  
>stole a jug of fresh tea. Dousing herself, Hotaru grew to Ranma. It  
was <br>only when she heard startled gasps did she realise that  
people had seen  
>her change. 'Damn, right in the open! How could I be so stupid? '<br>



>Pulling a small smoke bomb from his shirt, Ranma dropped it to the  
<br>ground. As soon as the smoke was thick enough, he used the old

>vanishing-ninja trick and slipped away. A few moments of running  
later <br>he was on the other side of the rubble that was once  
Ucchan's. Lying

>down on the ground, Ranma grabbed a couple of handfuls of dust and  
<br>threw them over himself. Just before Ukyo arrived, he sat up.

><br>If she knew just how powerful he was, he would probably scare  
her away

>forever. He'd seen it before with some of his best friends in  
Poland. <br>They wanted a superhero fighter, but when they got one,  
it too much for

>them to handle. Ranma valued his Ucchan too much for that to happen.  
<br>Maybe, over time, he could let her get used to him, but all at  
once

>would be too much.<br>

>"Ohhh, Ucchan, I have the worst headache!"<br>

>Tears streamed from her eyes and left streaked trails down her dusty  
<br>face. "Oh, Ranchan. I thought you were in there."

><br>Ranma looked at the rubble in question. "Don't worry, Ucchan. It  
takes

>more than a broken building to keep me down."<br>

>As she held onto her fiancée, Ukyo wondered how long it would be  
before <br>she could open again. Insurance covered it all, but the  
time it took to

>rebuild would be as damaging to Ucchan's reputation as the loss of  
<br>sales was.

><br>Then again, it was only a building. She was all right, and so  
was

>Ranma. Everything else could take care of itself.<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>Ranma arrived at Rei's place on Wednesday afternoon expecting her to  
be <br>angry. It was the first time he had seen her - as either  
himself or

>Hotaru - since her abrupt departure the previous day. Yesterday  
<br>afternoon, Ucchan's had been destroyed, so he could not bring  
himself

>to desert Ucchan and go and check on Rei. Now school was over, he  
had <br>changed, and now he could see the tomboy and let her get all  
that anger

>out of her system.<br>

>Ranma was pleasantly surprised to see Makoto escorting Rei up the  
<br>temple stairs as he approached. He liked Makoto, she was always  
nice,

>sort of like Ucchan. He thought it was a bit of a shame that the  
poor <br>girl seemed quite keen on him. Recently he had been starting  
to feel

>differently about Sailor Mars. Perhaps, maybe, someday he might even  
<br>tell her who he was.

><br>Catching up with the girls as they walked up the stairs, Ranma  
returned

>Makoto's smile. Bracing himself for a blast of Rei's famous temper,  
<br>Ranma watched in amazement as Rei's eyes simply passed straight  
across

>him without even acknowledging his existence.<br>

>Makoto seemed equally surprised. Last night as they were on the way  
to <br>intercept Mimete, Rei had told her what Ranma had said. Now,

instead of  
>abusing him, Rei just ignored him. Perhaps Rei really was mad this  
<br>time.  
><br>After the cold shoulder treatment continued all of the way into  
the  
>temple, Ranma laid a hand on Makoto's arm and took her aside. Rei  
<br>continued on into the kitchen fairly steadily and started on  
making  
>some snacks. "Mako-chan, what's wrong with Rei-san?"<br>  
>"She must be even madder than I thought. I've never seen her this  
mad <br>before. She wasn't even this mad when Usagi-chan stole her  
letter from  
>Sat... Um, from this guy she likes. She even accepted Shampoo's  
<br>challenge today when she turned up after school."  
><br>Rei's been getting letters from someone? Hang on, Shampoo is an  
Amazon.  
>If she challenged Rei, there should be nothing left of her. "She  
fought <br>Shampoo?"  
><br>"I tried to talk her out of it, but she was still so mad at you.  
She  
>just said that her grandfather taught her some Karate, and couldn't  
be <br>talked out of it."  
><br>Fidgeting, Ranma looked into Makoto's eyes, trying to see if she  
was  
>making some sort of joke. "Mako-chan, Shampoo is an Amazon. There's  
no <br>way Rei could beat her. Heck, without some special training  
for a  
>while, I don't think you could. Amazon's play for keeps. I saw her  
as <br>she walked up the stairs: there's no way she fought Shampoo  
and got off  
>that lightly."<br>  
>Makoto shrugged. "I'm telling you, she did. We'd all met up, and we  
<br>were heading home. Shampoo came along and walked right up to her.  
As  
>clear as daylight, she challenged her and Rei accepted. <br>"When  
they started fighting, we lost sight of them for a little while,  
  
>but soon enough we found Rei again. She was trying to get up off the  
<br>ground, so I guessed Shampoo must have beaten her and called it  
quits  
>then."<br>  
>Hands went into the air in exasperation. "That's not how it works,  
<br>Mako-chan! Amazons fight for real. They don't stop the first time  
  
>someone falls down, especially in matters of marriage. If Shampoo  
<br>challenged her to a fight, I can guarantee you, she wouldn't stop  
until  
>Rei-san is out of the running! Permanently!"<br>  
>A soft voice intruded from the side. "I realise you are new here,  
but <br>would you mind not yelling in the shrine. We try to preserve  
a peaceful  
>atmosphere."<br>  
>Ranma turned to see Rei in her traditional Shrine maiden's garb. She  
<br>had snacks laid out on her tray for two people. She seemed  
uninjured.  
><br>"I'm sorry, I didn't bring any snacks for you, I did not realise  
you  
>were here. Here you go Mako-chan, would you like some?"<br>  
  
>Turning to her tall friend, Rei offered some of the snacks she had

<br>prepared. After a moment's hesitation, Makoto took one and watched as  
>Rei sat down, completely ignoring Ranma. When time passed and Rei  
<br>failed to offer any to Ranma, Makoto passed up a plate with some nuts  
>on it. "Here you go, Ranma. Have some of these."<br>  
>"Um... Thanks."<br>  
>"I didn't notice you there. Are you Mako-chan's boyfriend?"<br>  
  
>Makoto's eyes started to shimmer when she heard Rei say that. 'Oh, how  
<br>long I have wanted Rei to realise that Ranma was my boyfriend and not  
>hers.'<br>  
>"Rei-san, I'm Ranma. You know me."<br>  
>"Hmm. Ranma... Ranma... I know! A popular noodle dish!"<br>  
  
>"That's Ramen."<br>  
>"Oh... A major Hindu god."<br>  
>"That's Rama!"<br>  
>Makoto leaned across and whispered in his ear. "Face it Ranma. She's  
<br>ignoring you. I think the other day was just too much, now she's  
  
>refusing to even talk to you."<br>  
>"It can't be. I insult her like that all the time. She knows better  
<br>than to be upset by it. Shampoo must have done something to her."  
  
><br>"I'm telling you Ranma, Shampoo didn't do anything. Look at her:  
not  
>even a hair on her head was touched."<br>  
>Ranma leaned close, then closer as Rei scooted away from him. "You  
<br>know, Mako-chan. I think you're right. Rei-san's hair's cleaner  
than  
>ever. Shampoo must have done something, then cleaned it out!"<br>  
  
>Makoto sighed and placed her face in her hands. "Ranma, you're  
<br>impossible."  
><br>Rei looked at her in confusion. "Who?"  
><br>After a few more minutes of continually introducing himself to  
Rei,  
>Ranma got fed up. Makoto might not believe it, but he knew. Shampoo  
had <br>done something. Something horrible. Something that made  
Rei-san forget  
>him. Who was he going to argue with if she ignored him?<br>  
>A few minutes of roof hopping brought him to the Nekohaten. It was a  
<br>small Ramen shop that Shampoo and Cologne had set up to help fund  
their  
>stay in Tokyo. Actually, Ranma suspected that Cologne wanted a  
holiday <br>from the duties of being the Matriarch, but who was he to  
complain?  
>After all, the longer she lived here, the longer he got to spend  
time <br>with his oldest and best friend.  
><br>Dropping to the ground out the front of the shop, Ranma walked  
through  
>the doors and saw Shampoo cleaning tables while Cologne was cooking  
in <br>the back. As soon as he stepped inside, Shampoo launched  
herself at  
>him, draping herself around all over him.<br>  
>As Shampoo rubbed her obvious assets against him, she tried for a  
kiss. <br>Leaning backwards, Ranma struggled to keep his distance.  
With his

>friend in trouble, the last thing he wanted to do was be kissing  
<br>Shampoo.  
><br>"Shampoo! Will you just hold up for a minute? This is serious."

><br>Hearing the distress in his voice, Shampoo, released him from  
her  
>loving embrace and led him to a table. Sitting down with him, she  
held <br>his hands and asked her great grandmother to bring them some  
Ramen.  
>"Shampoo be very serious for her husband."<br>  
>"Shampoo, I'm not your husband."<br>  
>"Soon you marry Shampoo, then you husband. Why you wait?"<br>

>"Because I've got friends here... and... and I like it in Japan...  
<br>and..."  
><br>Tearing up, Shampoo released his hands and turned away. "Shampoo  
  
>understand. Shampoo too too ugly. Husband never want Shampoo.  
Shampoo <br>go back to China in disgrace. Shampoo heart broken..."

><br>"Ah.. N-no! That's not what I said. I mean you're real pretty  
an' all  
>Shampoo, it's just---"<br>  
>Launching herself across the table, her tears magically evaporated  
and <br>she began nuzzling against his chest giving small sounds of

>contentment. Ranma's distress quickly faded as he realised just how  
she <br>had made him say those things. He was also rather glad that  
Cologne's  
>reflexes were still as good as they used to be. She had been just  
about <br>to place the bowls of steaming noodles on the table when a  
cuddly  
>bundle in a short skirt suddenly decided to occupy the same space.  
<br>Cologne rescued the food without losing a single drop.

><br>"Hey, Cologne-chan, maybe you can help me. I think Shampoo must  
have  
>done something to Rei-san. Shampoo challenged her this afternoon,  
and <br>now she doesn't even recognise me."  
><br>"If she accepted Shampoo's challenge, I see nothing wrong with  
whatever  
>the outcome would be."<br>  
>Accepting a bowl from Cologne, Ranma began to eat. Shampoo seemed a  
<br>little busy at the moment, so the wizened old figure bounced onto  
a  
>neighbouring table and began to eat it for her. "Hey, I care what  
the <br>outcome was. Shampoo should have challenged me if she wanted  
a fight."  
><br>"There is nothing wrong with one girl challenging another for the

>affections of a man they are competing over. Or for any other  
reason."<br>  
>"Well... I mean... Yeah.. But Rei-san didn't stand a chance. She's  
just <br>not in the same league as Shampoo."  
><br>"All the more reason why you should choose Shampoo and move back  
to  
>China with us. Please, Ranma. This mourning for you wife has lasted  
<br>long enough. We, the Amazons, are you family. Please come back to  
us."  
><br>"Aww, Cologne-chan, you know I never really left. I'll always be

an

>Amazon... in my heart, where it counts. Come on, you know she did  
<br>something. What was it?"

><br>Shampoo looked up at Ranma. "Shampoo use ancient Amazon  
technique on

>Violent Girl. Xia Fang Gao Shiatsu technique, block all memory of  
<br>Husband. Now Husband no worry about Violent Girl, come back to  
China

>with Shampoo, yes?"<br>

>Ranma pushed Shampoo off him and looked at her. "Come on, Shampoo. A  
<br>tomboy like that would never stop me from going to China with you  
if I

>wanted to."<br>

>"Husband agree marry Shampoo?"<br>

>"What? No! I didn't say that!"<br>

>"Then Shampoo no cure Violent Girl. Soon Husband realise that  
Shampoo <br>everything Husband need."

><br>Clutching his head in frustration - as well as he could with  
Shampoo

>still clinging onto him - Ranma turned his attention back to  
Cologne.<br>

>"I've never hear of this Xia Fang Gao Shiatsu technique. How come  
<br>there's some technique I don't know?"

><br>"Did it ever occur to you that maybe you were not taught  
everything

>while you were there?"<br>

>"Err... Actually, no, it hadn't... I thought I was taught  
everything."<br>

>Shampoo spoke from where she rested on her comfortable pillow. A  
nice, <br>warm, chest-shaped pillow that just happened to be attached  
to Ranma.

>"Is very ancient technique. Almost 250 year old!"<br>

>Shampoo's grip loosened when Cologne's staff struck her on the head,  
<br>causing Ranma to smirk. "I agree, Cologne-chan. 250 years isn't  
old.

>It's barely getting into the prime of life."<br>

>"Too true. Too true."<br>

>Watching as Cologne gathered up the empty Ramen bowls, Ranma tried  
his <br>final option. "I don't suppose you would be interested in  
teaching me?"

><br>Cologne smiled. "Why would I do that, my friend? Shampoo acted  
in

>accordance with the rules of challenges, and she was quite

<br>compassionate. Besides, I happen to think that there would not be  
a

>better wife for you in the entire world than Shampoo.<br>"She is  
smart, she is beautiful, and she is the best fighter of her

>generation. Look at her, she loves you dearly and would be easily  
able <br>to accommodate your curse when you choose to reveal it. Most

>importantly: she is an Amazon."<br>

>A note of pleading entered her voice. "Come back to China with us.  
<br>Marry Shampoo. Be among your friends and family. You used to be  
so

>happy there. Please..."<br>

>Untangling himself from Shampoo, Ranma walked to the door. "I can't  
say <br>I like what you did to her, Shampoo. But... Thank you for not  
hurting

>her. It shows you are a true warrior when you can deal with those

who <br>are not as capable as you are.

>"I... I want you to know, this hasn't really changed anything. If I  
<br>can't cure her by Friday, I'm gunna head back to the village.  
I'll find

>someone there to teach me, then I'll come back and cure  
Rei-san."<br>

>Watching as Ranma walked away, the women were quiet for a moment,  
then <br>Cologne turned to Shampoo with a huge grin spread across her  
wrinkled

>old face. "Well done, Shampoo. Your plan worked even better than I  
<br>expected. When he is back in the village, studying and amongst  
friends,

>he will never wish to return to Japan. <br>"Congratulations, Great  
Granddaughter. Soon you shall have your

>husband."<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>Night. Darkness. Silence. A time for people to sleep, and evil to  
plot.<br>

>Again Mistress 9 sat on her throne looking down on her subject,  
Tomoe <br>Souichi. Darkness cloaked the room into obscurity and gave  
an ominous

>taint to the decorations. Around the throne, dolls were placed,  
<br>scattered at random on the floor. The shadows and darkness gave  
their

>porcelain and plastic features a sinister aspect. Smiles turned into  
<br>leers, eyes became sunken pits of evil, and delicate hands seemed  
to

>clench and hide dangerous secrets.<br>

>Mistress 9 resided in the shadows, almost drinking them up. Seated  
on <br>her throne, she occasionally stroked one of the dolls. She  
petted it as

>though she was a third rate villain in a cheesy spy movie pampering  
<br>their cat. Of course, no-one would dare to pamper a cat here, so  
close

>to her. Her host's influence was still too strong... Such an act  
would <br>be foolhardy at best; dangerous at worst.

><br>Moving her head, Mistress 9's eyes seemed to shine in the  
reflected

>light. "How goes the gathering of Heart Crystals?"<br>

>Souichi cleared his throat. "Things are progressing. Some have been  
<br>gathered... but the Sailor Senshi continually interfere."

><br>Such an admission was dangerous. Not only for Mimete, who was  
currently

>in charge of collecting them, but also for him. If Mistress 9's  
<br>displeasure should fall upon the messenger - her appointed leader  
of

>the Witches - he could expect his death to follow quickly.<br>

>"Something has occurred that has changed our priorities. In this  
task <br>you cannot fail me. There is to be no excuses this time."

><br>"Y-yes, Mistress."

><br>"Good. There is a girl... Her name is Hino Rei. Recently she was

>subjected to the Xia Fang Gao Shiatsu technique. You have until the  
end <br>of Thursday to cure her. Do you understand?"

><br>"N-no, Mistress. I... I do not understand. Who is this girl? Why  
should

>we care what happens to her? When Master Pharaoh 90 appears, what

would  
><br>it matter the state of one girl?"  
><br>Her regal voice was like ice. "Do not question me. Do not ask me how I  
>know this. Suffice it to know that I have commanded and you obey...  
<br>Wait... Let me say that if you fail in this, our entire mission is  
>endangered. Failure at this crucial point means we may fail to summon  
<br>our Master. Spare no effort.  
>"A group of Amazons operate a restaurant called the Nekohaten. They  
<br>will know of the cure."  
><br>Realising that he was dismissed, Tomoe withdrew from the room. He did  
>not know who the girl was, or why she was important. All that mattered  
<br>was that they needed to cure her. If they failed... it would not only  
>mean his end, it would be the end of all they had worked and strived  
<br>for.  
><br>In the darkness, Mistress 9 continued to pat her doll, wondering how  
>best she might convince Ranma to stay in Japan. She had seen all he had  
<br>that day, from her vantage point lurking within his mind. For him to go  
>to China would be an unmitigated disaster.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Dawn was but a few short hours away as Mimete arrived out the front of  
<br>the Nekohaten. As soon as the elder Tomoe had left his mistress, he had  
>awoken the Witch, commanding her into action. Dragging someone as  
<br>flighty as Witch Mimete out of bed and depriving her of her beauty  
>sleep was a sure means of bringing out the worst in her personality...  
<br>And you don't get to be one of the head minions of the forces of evil  
>by being a goody-two-shoes.<br>  
>She was only armed with the knowledge that a girl in here knew how to  
<br>fulfil their mission. Well... that, her substantial magic and the  
>presence of two Daimons. Even now a third one was being prepared back  
<br>at his home: Souichi had pulled out all the stops and had armed her  
>better than ever before. Both their lives and the future of their  
<br>entire mission waited upon her success tonight.  
><br>Stepping forward, Mimete placed a hand on the door. Even as she touched  
>it, a flicker from one of the streetlights caught her attention.  
<br>Whipping her head to the side, for a moment she could have sworn she  
>saw one of the Sailor Senshi... but there was no-one there. Besides,  
<br>none of the Senshi would hesitate to attack her. She must be feeling  
>tense from lack of sleep and the fear of her burden. <br>  
>Giving the handle a light shove, she smashed the door off its hinges.  
<br>With a rattle and clatter it landed in the middle of the darkened  
>restaurant. Mimete smiled as she walked in and sat at one of the  
<br>chairs. That much noise would be sure to rouse any people still  
>sleeping in here, which meant they would come to her. Since her two  
<br>Daimons were hidden in the shadows at the moment, she knew that they

>would be surprised.<br>  
>She had barely had time to admire her nails before the fun started.  
A <br>tall, glamorous looking girl in a shirt dress and her ancient  
housemate  
>came down the stairs and entered the dining area of the Nekohaten.  
<br>Mimete gave them her nicest smile, looking as cute and innocent  
as  
>could be.<br>  
>"Pretty please Miss... Please tell me how to cure the Xai Fang Gao  
<br>Shiatsu technique."  
><br>Shampoo frowned prettily. Actually, everything she did, she did  
  
>prettily. "Who you?"<br>  
>Cologne simply stayed quiet. Her eyes and senses were better than  
<br>Shampoo's. She was more observant, and could see the two forms  
hulking  
>in the shadows of their restaurant. Palming a pair of shuriken she  
<br>routinely kept hidden on her, Cologne prepared herself mentally.  
She  
>could tell by their shapes that the lurkers would not be identified  
by <br>'who' but by 'what'.  
><br>Gesturing slightly with her hand, Cologne passed a message to  
Shampoo:  
>'enemies'. No doubt the girl realised this already since their  
<br>uninvited guest had just told them that she wanted to cure Hino  
Rei.  
>Why this person expected Shampoo to cure her was a mystery: it took  
so <br>much effort to afflict her in the first place.  
><br>A shadow moved outside, and Cologne struck. Against this sort of  
force,  
>there was no need to be delicate. Against this sort of force, she  
<br>wished Ranma, the Sailor Senshi, and anyone else they could find  
was  
>also here. But they were Amazons, and they would die like Amazons.  
<br>  
>Both shuriken struck Mimete, one each in the front of her shoulders,  
<br>causing her to scream in agony. "Ha! Your overconfidence is a  
  
>weakness!"<br>  
>Mimete stumbled backwards, a small trickle of blood trickling down  
each <br>arm. "Catch them!" She yelled. "Do not damage the young one,  
but with  
>the old one you need not be as careful."<br>  
>With a yell and a scream, Shampoo drew her bonbori and charged. Her  
<br>great grandmother had started this, and she would finish it.  
  
>Concentrating on the retreating form ahead of her, Shampoo was  
caught <br>by surprise when a massive grey arm struck from the  
darkness, belting  
>her across the room.<br>  
>Pulling herself from the hole she had made in the wall, Shampoo  
<br>collected herself and charged in. This time she was more careful,  
and  
>joined her great grandmother in the fight against the two Daimons.  
She <br>did not know what they were, but now that they were out of  
hiding, she  
>could see them for their evil selves. <br>  
>Against two monsters, the most Cologne could manage was a retreating  
<br>defence of her and Shampoo. When Shampoo leapt in, the young  
warrior



>was able to get a devastating hit against the grey skinned one that had <br>hit her earlier. With a sharp 1-2-3 action, her bonbori hammered into  
>its undefended side, knocking the two... things... together.<br>

>As she landed and moved into a ready stance, Shampoo was horrified to <br>see how much effect her hardest blows had. None. Both creatures were

>struggling back to their feet, and now they seemed even angrier.  
<br>

>Returning to the fray, Shampoo and Cologne continued to beat at the <br>Daimons. All in all, they gave better than they got, but they were

>being worn down. When a blow sneaked through Shampoo's defences and <br>sent her across the room stunned, Cologne struck. It was a modified

>version of the Amakurigen technique, one she had specifically tailored <br>to defeat their enemies.

><br>Working her way down one massive arm, Cologne hammered at it with her

>staff. Before the Daimon could dodge or block, she had strafed the <br>limb, pock marking it with innumerable holes, and assuring it of agony.

><br>Although the Daimon withdrew, Cologne could see that it was not from

>her attack. Both of them had backed away, leaving space for their <br>controller to see Cologne. Cologne smiled and deftly reached for

>another pair of shuriken. "Back again little miss? You shall fare no <br>better this time."

><br>This time when the spinning blades went out, the Witch moved with an

>unnatural speed. It almost seemed as though the rest of the world had <br>slowed down compared to her. Simply placing her palm upwards in the

>path of the shuriken was enough to deflect them and send them <br>clattering to the floor.

><br>Even with her limited experience in the field, Cologne could tell that

>woman reeked of magical power. Somehow she was using it to accelerate <br>all of her actions. To someone magically enhanced like her, speeches

>and a battle could seem to take ten or twenty minutes. To the rest of <br>the world, mere seconds or minutes would pass. It was why Sailor Moon

>and her ilk could have the time to shout challenges and defeat demons - <br>not to mention their long attack sequences - all because of their

>magical enhancements. Added to Mimete's magical shielding against <br>Cologne's projectiles, and the fact that she had managed to heal the

>small wounds in her shoulders, it was all enough to make Cologne's <br>blood run cold.

><br>Cold enough for the Hiryyu Shoten Ha, if only she could live long

>enough to use it. She did not know if such an attack would defeat their <br>enemies, but a successful attack would certainly by them the time they

>needed to escape. Even as she moved in for the attack, Cologne knew she <br>was too slow. Watching as the Witch brought up her wand,

Cologne prayed  
>for the timely arrival of rescuers, but she knew it would not  
happen. <br>  
>The words seemed to shake the walls as Witch Mimete cried them.  
"CHARM <br>BUSTER!"  
><br>When the star on the end finally pointed at Cologne, wave after  
wave of  
>crushing power came pouring out. Struck full in the chest, Cologne  
was <br>knocked from her staff and smashed through the wall of the  
Nekohaten.  
>Any physical blow that only knocked her that far she would have been  
<br>laughed off. Magic was different, and as she grasped futilely at  
  
>consciousness, her last view was of black boots and skirt, and long,  
<br>green hair.  
><br>When Shampoo recovered from the blow that had knocked her into  
the  
>wall, she was being held by her long purple hair. Her feet were  
<br>dangling off the ground by almost a foot, and her arms hung by  
her  
>side. Glancing around the room cautiously, she could see all of  
their <br>enemies intact, one of the big monsters still held her  
great  
>grandmother. Although the old woman did not look injured, she was  
<br>definitely unconscious or dead. Shampoo released a breath she did  
not  
>realise she was holding when she could see Cologne's chest rise and  
<br>fall slightly.  
><br>Mimete smiled at her and fluffed her hair. "Hello again. Do you  
want to  
>talk to me now?"<br>  
>Shampoo clamped her lips together and resolved not to tell her  
<br>anything.  
><br>Still smiling, Mimete turned to the Daimon nearest her, the one  
that  
>held Cologne. "Tear an arm off the old woman."<br>  
>"NO!... Sh-Shampoo talk. Shampoo tell Evil Witch how to cure. Just  
no <br>hurt Great Grandmother."  
><br>Mimete waved lazily, and the Daimon ceased its actions.  
Releasing a  
>shuddering breath, Shampoo began to speak.<br>  
>It was a betrayal of the Amazon tribe, but Cologne's death was too  
high <br>a price to keep the secret. Besides, come morning, she would  
find her  
>Husband. Together they would hunt down this woman and dance on her  
<br>grave. You can take things from Amazons, but you never get to  
keep  
>them.<br>  
>Eventually, the Witch and her minions left. As Shampoo crawled to  
her <br>Great Grandmother and held her in her hands, she could have  
sworn she  
>heard the sound of another pair of booted feet. As quickly as the  
sound <br>started, it faded into the darkness and silence of the  
night.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Thursday morning was quite a normal breakfast for the Outer  
Senshi. The  
>three of them had met at a fashionable little French style caf  ,  
and <br>were enjoying the beautiful day. The sun was shining and the  
birds were

>chirping in the trees. <br>  
>Haruka took a big bite from a croissant, and smiled at Michiru's  
<br>comment. "It was so funny. I was over at Rei-chan's last night,  
and  
>they were so silly. You know how Mako-chan and Rei-chan have been  
<br>competing over the same boy for a while? Well the competition's  
over."  
><br>The tall blonde placed her hand on Michiru's. "Silly girls,  
fighting  
>over a boy."<br>  
>"Well, I'd fight for you if you started after someone. Anyway, it  
seems <br>that everything has been resolved now. It sounds like our  
favourite  
>soap opera has probably ended."<br>  
>Setsuna raised an eyebrow as she delicately spread some jam. "Who  
won?"<br>  
>"What? The omniscient Meiou Setsuna doesn't know?"<br>  
>"Please, Haruka-san. The Gates of Time are a great responsibility. I  
do <br>not use them to find out all of the gossip before it happens."

><br>Michiru continued, covering up before Haruka got to say  
anything.  
>"Mako-chan as a matter of fact. Apparently Ranma and Rei-chan had a  
<br>really big fight on Tuesday. Now they even refuse to speak to  
each  
>other."<br>  
>That gave Setsuna pause. "I thought... I thought that Rei-chan would  
<br>end up with Ranma. They seemed... almost compatible. Michiru,  
Haruka,  
>you know Rei well. Can I ask you to speak to her? Perhaps she can be  
<br>convinced to restart her suit for Ranma."  
><br>"But... But I thought you didn't like Ranma because he was  
Hotaru-  
>chan's brother."<br>  
>"True. It is true that there is something strange about Ranma. It is  
<br>also true that his sister seems to be connected to the forces of  
evil.  
>On the other hand, consider who Rei-chan's other suitor is."<br>

>"Umm... Of course! Saturn Knight! Boy, you really do have it in for  
him <br>if you would prefer Rei-chan to associate with Ranma than  
with Saturn  
>Knight."<br>  
>"I do. I have no trust for Saturn Knight. While I have little trust  
for <br>Ranma, there is always the hope that while she is pursuing  
two men, she  
>might meet a third, acceptable, man." Setsuna punctuated each point  
<br>with a small piece of sweet bread she held between her long,  
elegant  
>fingers.<br>  
>Haruka gestured with her own jam coated bun. "If it's this  
important, <br>why not look into the future? We could always use that  
information to  
>try and make things better, but only if we know what is going to go  
<br>wrong."  
><br>Grimacing, she hid her expression behind a sip of juice. "I  
cannot. No,  
>more precisely: I may not. I have expressly forbade myself from  
<br>investigating the future at this juncture. For that matter, I  
have also

>been forbidden from examining the recent past of the Senshi and their <br>associates."

><br>"Really? Who forbade you? Neo-Queen Serenity in Crystal Tokyo?"

><br>"Worse. I did. The one person who I cannot disobey. If Neo-Queen

>Serenity or Sailor Moon - as she is known now - forbade me, I may  
<br>consider some events too important to risk obeying her. Since my future

>self forbade me by saying she did not know, I assure a paradox if I  
<br>look."

><br>Michiru frowned in concentration. "What if you were lying?"

><br>Setsuna did not even deign to answer that one.

><br>"Oh... Right... Silly question. OK, then, we'll do it. Haruka?  
What do

>you think of a quick ride to Rei's place?"<br>

>The place in question was the Hikawa shrine. A beautiful little  
shrine <br>set back from the road, with trees and flowers and those  
little

>dangling paper ornaments. It was a lovely scene, with a light breeze  
<br>stirring the healthy green branches, and gently tinkling a wind  
chime

>somewhere. <br>

>Even just the beauty of it all was enough to make the Daimon want to  
<br>puke. When you counted in the fact that the Shrine was surrounded  
by

>wards, and the Daimon was here on a mission of mercy to heal  
someone... <br>it all added up to a distinctly nauseous feeling  
monster. Not that this

>monster was going to let a little tummy ache scare it away. It had a  
<br>job to do, and no-one would stop it from succeeding.

><br>No matter how much it disliked the idea of helping someone.

><br>Leaving its mistress and fellow Daimon concealed in the shadows,  
the

>Daimon strode forward in the morning light. Now was the time to  
strike, <br>the recipient of their reluctant good deed would just be  
waking up, and

>should be vulnerable. With only the slightest of resistance, the  
Daimon <br>smashed through the wards around the shrine. Although it  
could not hear

>them, the Daimon knew those broken wards would be attached to some  
form <br>of alarm system, warning the priest of it's intrusion. Time  
was short.

><br>Suspecting that the girl it was after was in the house adjacent  
to the

>shrine, the Daimon charged there at a run. Just as it rounded the  
<br>corner, it bounced into something small and soft. Small, soft and

>attached to a massive quantity of black hair. The girl! The Daimon  
was <br>so ecstatic it chuckled slightly. This was going to be so  
easy! Heck,

>judging by the way she dressed she was some meek and mild temple  
<br>maiden.

><br>The Daimon stepped forward and reached out for her. "You have  
nothing

>to fear... this won't hurt a bit."<br>

>Rei looked up at the monstrous form that towered over her. It's  
breath <br>was fetid and long, ropy strands of yellow saliva fell out

of its maw  
>as it spoke. 'There's no chance I'm waiting around for that thing to  
<br>catch me!' Kicking its arm to one side, Rei rolled over and  
dodged away  
>from the hulking form.<br>  
>Getting to her feet, she could feel the massive hands reaching for  
her <br>again. As fast as she could move, Rei was not fast enough. A  
large,  
>clawed hand snagged the back of her shirt and she felt herself being  
<br>jerked backwards. Even as she struggled, she could see the Daimon  
  
>bringing a bottle of something toward her head. 'No! They must have  
<br>discovered I was a Senshi! If I stay here, I'm going to end up  
  
>brainwashed like Beryl did to Tuxedo Kamen!'  
>Bracing her feet against the Daimon's shins, Rei angled her arms  
<br>backwards then kicked off. With a mighty effort, she burst the  
top few  
>buttons on her shirt, and rolled out of the bulky garment. Coming  
up <br>from her roll on the ground, Rei reached for her wards. If she  
could  
>tag the Daimon, it would give her enough time to transform and then  
she <br>could really get cooking.  
><br>Her reaching hand met bare flesh. Looking down, Rei cursed her  
  
>stupidity. In her hurry to escape the Daimon, she had forgotten that  
<br>all her wards were in one of the shirt's inner pockets.  
Scrambling to  
>her feet, Rei let out a short scream and began to run away from the  
<br>monster that was chasing her.  
><br>They had done two laps of the shrine, and Rei could feel her  
lungs  
>searing with every breath. The tireless Daimon was still right on  
her <br>heels, and unless she got help or managed to distract it, she  
knew she  
>was done for. Who knew what horrible fate awaited her when the  
Daimon <br>caught her?  
><br>She was passing the front of the shrine when she heard three  
voices cry  
>out amid the screeching of brakes. Sparing a glance down the shrine  
<br>stairs, she saw some innocent bystander, and two of the Outer  
Senshi.  
>She sincerely hoped Haruka and Michiru would risk changing; she was  
not <br>sure if she could keep running long enough to let them hide  
first.  
><br>Luck was on her side, and in what seemed like a blink of an eye,  
three  
>forms were charging up the stairs. The pretty soldiers Neptune and  
<br>Uranus were sprinting up, and beside them was the angriest  
looking man  
>she had ever seen. Somehow, she almost worried that he was in league  
<br>with the Daimon, because surely no normal man could move that  
fast. Nor  
>did they glow bright blue and leave smoking marks on the stairs.<br>  
  
>Rei passed the stairs and was gone in a moment. Behind her came the  
<br>Daimon and it met a welcome that few would ever see, and none  
would  
>survive. In a flair of green, gold and black, two magical and one Ki  
<br>strike hit home.

>"DEEP SUBMERGE!"<br>"SPACE SWORD BLASTER!"  
>"KIJIN RAISHUU-DAN!"<br>  
>The preoccupied Daimon did not stand a chance. Even if it had been  
<br>fully prepared, the orchestrated strike may well have defeated  
whatever  
>resistance it presented. As it was, it was simply pummelled into  
<br>pieces; little bits that sprayed over the cobble stones, then  
shortly  
>vanished.<br>  
>Heaving and gasping Rei staggered to a stop and collapsed to her  
knees. <br>As she drank in grateful breaths of life giving air, she  
gave mentally  
>gave thanks to her two friends that had rescued her. Behind the  
<br>partially dressed Rei, Neptune and Uranus dropped from their  
Senshi  
>forms back into their normal attire. While they were preoccupied  
with <br>this, Ranma brought his Ki under control and fought to  
control his  
>anger. <br>  
>Seeing Rei in danger had made him loose control. Despite his desire  
to <br>hide himself from these women until his time for revenge,  
Ranma had  
>shown some of his true power. Not only that, but he had even use one  
of <br>the sealed techniques. His father's invention, the Kijin  
Raishuu-Dan,  
>or Fierce God Attack Shot was one of the deadly Yama Sen Ken, first  
of <br>the Saotome forbidden techniques. He only hoped that his  
temporary  
>allies had been too busy to observe and learn the attack. The  
thought <br>of his enemies having access to Ki powered vacuum strikes  
sent shivers  
>up his spine. The Saotome Forbidden Techniques were sealed for a  
<br>reason.  
><br>Looking at the two tall girls, Ranma forced a tight grin. "Thank  
you. I  
>could have handled it, but... but you helped Rei-san, and I won't  
<br>forget that."  
><br>Michiru smiled and tried to bring the conversation to friendlier  
  
>grounds. "Rei-chan is a friend of ours. We couldn't let her get  
hurt. <br>Please, Ranma, there's no need for us to be enemies. We all  
want the  
>same thing."<br>  
>Ranma slapped away her hand as she offered it to him. "The day I  
accept <br>a partnership with you and your kind is the day I will rot  
in hell."  
><br>Turning to speak to his temple maiden, he turned bright red. The  
poor  
>girl was still in the middle of pulling her shirt on with the  
<br>assistance of Haruka. If Ranma was not already aware of the fact  
that  
>she was really a girl, he would have taken her apart there and then  
for <br>such a transgression. Turning his back, Ranma waited until he  
heard  
>them approach. <br>  
>"Michiru, Haruka, thank you for saving me. I... I don't think I  
could <br>have kept running much longer."  
><br>Glancing across at the still stern looking man beside her lover,  
Haruka  
>cleared her throat. "Rei-chan, I realise you and Ranma have had a

<br>fight, but he was trying to save you. The least you could do is say

>thank you."<br>

>"Who?... Oh, hello. I didn't notice you there. Have you come to visit <br>the shrine?"

><br>"Ahh, Rei-chan, you saw him running up the stairs with us. He was going

>to attack the Daimon."<br>

>"I did? Oh, nice to meet you, Sir. I'm Hino Rei."<br>

>Michiru and Haruka tried to get her to admit to knowing Ranma for a <br>while. The whole time, Ranma stood there with the slightest of smiles

>on his face. He had to admire Shampoo. The Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu

<br>technique worked perfectly. It really was a work of art. Not only had

>she forgotten him, she seemed incapable of remembering him. He would <br>have to get that cure. There was no way that he would live without

>someone to yell at him. <br>

>Without a word he turned and headed down the stairs leaving the temple. <br>He would take a look at some of his information at home, and then he

>would try and cure Rei-san later today. Mulling over his plans, he

<br>hardly noticed it when Michiru walked beside him down the stairs, and

>out to where Haruka's car was parked.<br>

>"There's something wrong with Rei-chan, isn't there?"<br>

>"Yep."<br>

>"She'd never behave like that. Even if she's been in a fight with you, <br>she would never be this rude. You know, don't you? You know what's

>wrong with Rei-chan."<br>

>Ranma nodded his head. The way she sounded, he could almost believe <br>that a cold hearted killer like her had a soft side. But then again,

>even killers can have friends they care for. "There are a pair of <br>Amazons living at a place called the Nekohaten. They've used a memory

>technique on her called the Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu technique." Ranma

<br>shrugged. "They won't teach me the cure, but I can find it out in

>China. If I haven't managed to figure out a cure for her today, I'll <br>head back to China and ask the Joketsuzoku myself."

><br>Michiru played with a strand of green hair and looked nervous.

>"Would... would they be willing to teach Haruka or I? We're Sailor <br>Senshi, after all."

><br>Ranma laughed out loud. "Don't be absurd, and don't be insulting:

>you're no more one of the Sailors than I am. Besides, the Amazons prize <br>their secrecy above all else. They'd laugh in your face."

><br>Ignoring her protests, Ranma turned his back on her and ran off. The

>sooner he was back at his home, the sooner he could look for a solution <br>to Rei-chan's problem.

><br>Behind him, a flustered Michiru returned to help Haruka with Rei. The

>strong willed girl was quickly recovering from the attack. She had  
<br>fought monsters countless times before, and this one was no  
different  
>really. The Outer Senshi might not agree with the Inner's on how  
things <br>were done, but they were all on the same side really, and  
that meant  
>protecting each other.<br>  
>Outside the Shrine, Mimete and her Daimon cursed. They would retrieve  
<br>their reinforcements, and then try again. They had completed half  
their  
>mission flawlessly, there was no way a simple temple maiden would be  
<br>able to resist them.  
><br>Leaving the fully recovered Rei at her temple, Michiru and  
Haruka  
>cornered Setsuna back at their home. Haruka was pacing in front of  
her, <br>and Michiru looked concerned even though she was seated next  
to the  
>older lady.<br>  
>"I'm telling you, it was really weird. Rei honestly didn't know who  
he <br>was. Even if we introduced him, she would forget in just a few

>moments."<br>

>Michiru nodded in agreement. "It was quite disturbing."<br>

>Setsuna placed a finger to her cheek as she thought about what the  
girls <br>had told her. Some sort of exotic mind manipulation  
technique? It

>sounded implausible, but they were quite sure of the results. The  
two <br>Outer Senshi might not have her breadth of experience, but  
they were

>smart and good observers. If they said that was how Rei behaved, she  
<br>would believe them.

><br>The question was, what could they do to help Rei? Not only  
because she

>wanted Ranma and Rei to get back together to offset any chance that  
<br>Saturn Knight might have, she also cared about the girl. Setsuna  
tried

>hard to maintain her cold and indifferent exterior, but inside her  
<br>heart had leapt with joy when she had been reunited with the  
Inner

>Senshi and her Princess. They girls would need time to grow into  
their <br>roles, and become the beacons of nobility they once were,  
but Setsuna

>was prepared to wait. Her only problem now was time. This problem  
<br>needed a resolution, and it needed one now.

><br>Time seemed to be the key problem wherever Setsuna was  
concerned. There

>was either too much - like waiting thousands of years for her  
Kingdom <br>to be reborn - or too little - like now. What was worse  
was her own

>prohibition against using the Gates Of Time to observe the Senshi or  
<br>their friends. The Senshi or their friends... That was the key.  
If her

>future self wanted to bar her from all time travel, she would simply  
<br>have said so. Instead she had said not to watch the Senshi and  
their

>friends. <br>

>Shampoo attacked Rei, and was Rei's rival for Ranma. She crashed  
<br>Makoto's party and had no other association with the Senshi other  
than



>Ranma. Ranma was not one of the Senshi, but he was one of their  
<br>friends. That meant she could not watch Ranma's activities, but  
there  
>was nothing against watching Shampoo's. If the Amazon had indeed  
used <br>some form of magic or acupressure against Rei, she would be  
able to see  
>exactly what happened. Even better, she could watch the girl's  
entire <br>life if necessary and find the cure that way.

><br>Barely a moment had passed while Setsuna had considered her  
options.  
>Her brain working furiously - and trying to fit in some of the  
annoying <br>pieces left in the puzzle - she smile confidently.  
Gesturing with the  
>hand that had been scratching her cheek, Setsuna moved herself from  
<br>puzzled co-conspirator to wise benefactor.  
><br>"Well done. Your work has confirmed what we needed to be sure  
of. Now  
>that we have checked on this, there is nothing else that you need to  
<br>worry about. I shall meet you again this afternoon with the cure  
to the  
>Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu technique."<br>  
>"But... But... You mean that's it? What about the Daimon? What about  
<br>the Witches?"  
><br>Setsuna gave a smile, and tried to hide the fact that she had

>momentarily forgotten the Witch's involvement. 'Well, I'm only  
human,' <br>she thought. "Naturally we must be concerned about the  
Witches. I am  
>also suspicious about that attack on Rei this morning. Something  
does <br>not feel right. I will leave dealing with them to the pair  
of you."  
><br>With the minimum fanfare possible, Setsuna transformed into  
Sailor  
>Pluto. With a wave of her staff she opened a portal to the Gates Of  
<br>Time. Giving a nod of her head, she walked though into that other  
  
>realms. The Gates Of Time were a mystery even to her; the person who  
<br>guarded them. They were a source of unlimited danger and  
unlimited  
>benefit. In the wrong hands, they could destroy the world. Wielded  
<br>properly, they could do untold good.  
><br>Twisting with her mind, she forced one of the Gates to open to  
the  
>Nekohaten. If she wanted watch Shampoo, this would be the easiest  
place <br>to find her. Hmm. The place was deserted. Deserted and  
heavily damaged.  
>Sailor Pluto tapped her lip in perplexity. This should not be  
possible <br>from what she had heard. None of the Senshi had done  
anything to them  
>in the last few days, and from what she had heard of their fighting  
<br>prowess, few other people would be capable of doing this.

><br>With a mental wrench, the Gates shifted further back, easily  
sliding in  
>reverse until an ambulance arrived. Cologne was unloaded and  
returned <br>to the restaurant on a stretcher. From there, ambulance  
men lifted her  
>gently to the ground, checked her pulse, consulted with a frantic  
<br>Shampoo, then got into their ambulance and charged away

backwards.

><br>Not only could the Gates be useful, they could also be entertaining.

>She remembered a time long ago when she had watched a volcano <br>erupting... all in reverse. Lava pulled trees from the ground, birds

>flew backwards and... The wool-gathering soldier Sailor Pluto shook her <br>head. Reminiscing was fun, but it did not get the job done.

Looking

>through the Gate, Pluto watched the ambulance arrive again. Shampoo was <br>very worried about her great grandmother that had not awoken yet. She

>was also babbling about monsters, if she was interpreting those <br>gestures correctly.

><br>Sailor Pluto smiled. This was what she had really come to see.

The view

>twitched again, and Pluto could see it was early morning, and a trio of <br>shadowy figures were approaching the Nekohaten in the darkness. 'This

>was when I want to be', she thought as she stepped through. 'There was <br>something too coincidental about Rei's attacker today.'

><br>In the darkness of the night, Sailor Pluto's arrival was marked by a

>brief flash. Quickly she stepped back and placed her back to the wall <br>of the restaurant. She did not have to wait too long before the sound

>of breaking wood announced the entry of Mimete. <br>

>After giving them a moment to enter, she slid around to the front and <br>peaked into the entrance. Watching Witch Mimete sitting calmly inside

>made her blood boil. All she really wanted to do was jump in and <br>destroy the woman before she could hurt these innocents but she held

>herself back. She needed to know what the Witch was after and, more <br>importantly, she could not risk damaging the timeline like that.

>Viewing the past was more dangerous than viewing the future. The risk <br>of doing something irreparable was much, much greater.

><br>From her position in the doorway, Sailor Pluto watched the fight,

>cringing every time Shampoo or Cologne was struck, and silently <br>cheering their every victory. Watching the two of them fight, she could

>believe quite easily in some mystical mind erasing technique. Anyone <br>that could do those sorts of attacks at that age must be a living

>library. An old woman that could hold off two Daimons and a Witch for <br>as long as she did was someone irreplaceable in the world.

><br>When she saw Mimete powering up for her Charm Buster attack, Sailor

>Pluto knew she needed to act. She could not confront the Witch <br>directly, nor could she whisk Cologne from danger entirely. What she

>could do was ensure that the old woman survived the encounter with the <br>Witch's deadly magic. Sprinting around to the side of the building,

>Pluto extended her powers through the wall, and around the old

woman. <br>Sweating with effort, Pluto laid in a protective shield for Cologne. It

>would not block all of the damage, but it would block some.<br>

>When the attack came, Pluto grunted in shared agony. Just as Cologne <br>sailed through the concrete wall of the restaurant, Pluto was there,

>catching the stunned woman and easing her to the ground. The poor old <br>lady already seemed unconscious, but at least she was still breathing.

>Nobody but her would ever know what she had done, but deep inside, <br>Pluto smiled. It was nice not having to do what was necessary - but

>sometimes unpleasant - all the time. It felt so refreshing just to do <br>something good and helpful purely because she could, without concern of

>raising the Moon Kingdom again.<br>

>When the Daimon came to retrieve Cologne, Sailor Pluto was already in <br>the Nekohaten. She was hiding in the shadows that had originally hidden

>the Daimons from Shampoo. From her vantage point, she heard and saw <br>everything. Eventually Mimete departed, and Shampoo was distracted by

>Cologne. Taking advantage of the situation, Pluto made good her escape <br>also. Outside the Nekohaten, Sailor Pluto summoned a portal to the

>Gates Of Time and left the here and now of her subjective past for the <br>where and when of the nebulous Gates.

><br>Sitting in her sanctuary, Sailor Pluto pondered on what she had seen.

>True, The Witches 5 now had the knowledge of a cure for the Xai Fang <br>Gao Shiatsu technique. But they did not have the technique itself. More

>importantly, there was only one person afflicted by it, and her blind <br>spot only extended to Ranma. Why would the Witches 5 be interested in

>curing Hino Rei? <br>

>It could be Ranma, but she doubted it. From her limited exposure to him <br>- and mainly based on reports by Michiru and other Senshi - he seemed a

>reasonably nice but slightly naive person. No, she doubted that he <br>would have the inclination or the influence to organise something like

>this. Nor was he likely to have his own fiancée assaulted. On the other <br>hand, his sister might. They Outers were already quite sure that she

>was in league with the Witches in some fashion: Means. She might prefer <br>Rei to Shampoo, the Inner Senshi thought so: Motive. She was living

>with Tomoe Souichi, and may have spoken to Ranma about Rei's problem <br>last night: Opportunity.

><br>Means, motive and opportunity, the three keys to any crime. Everything

>pointed at Tomoe Hotaru, but even then it was all circumstantial <br>evidence. It was all they ever seemed to have on the girl... but some

>day she would slip up, and then they would know for sure. In the mean <br>time, Sailor Pluto had all they needed to be able to cure Hino Rei, and

>stave off Saturn Knight's further affections to the Senshi.<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>Hotaru slammed the book shut then threw it across the room in a fit of <br>pique. 'Damn! All this study, and she still didn't have anything!' The

>best lead she had been able to find so far was in a old German text <br>book she had found in the library. She did not speak German, but her

>Polish was good enough to be able to read most of it.<br>

>According to this guy Freud, Rei was probably suffering a severe case <br>of penis envy, and all her troubles could be traced back to an

>incomplete relationship developed with her mother. Personally, Ranma <br>thought Freud was a bit strange in the head, but he was supposed to be

>the expert. Unfortunately, his book did not really indicate any <br>practical cures for amnesia or secret Amazon memory techniques. The

>best it offered was the suggestion that Rei should be kept in familiar <br>surroundings, and everyone should treat her normally.

><br>Nodding her head, Hotaru realised that this was where she had gone

>wrong. She had tried to be nice to Rei and look what happened: Rei <br>can't remember her. There was an easy solution to that. He knew that

>Rei's and her friends liked to hang out at one of the malls not too far <br>away. If Ranma should happen to bump into her there... well, what sort

>of things could he say to make an uncute tomboy feel normal?<br>

>Outside the house, Ranma poured some hot water on himself and filled <br>out his clothes. It had to be outside because the first time he had

>done so inside, Souichi had seen it. Immediately the father-figure had <br>panicked and started raving about evil alien entities possessing his

>daughter. Ranma had changed back then and managed to calm him down with <br>the aid of Mistress 9's advice. Since then he had known to transform

>out of the man's sight.<br>

>Once he was in the mall, it was a matter of searching for the girls. He <br>had already taken a quick look in the Crown Arcade, but none of the

>crowd was there. That meant they must be out, either looking at boys or <br>searching for ice-cream. It all depended who was leading today; Makoto

>or Usagi. He was just getting ready to set out when he felt a familiar <br>voice in his mind.

><br>"Ranma... do you feel something? I don't know what it is... almost like

>someone is watching us..."<br>

>Ranma concentrated and swept the room with his extraordinarily keen <br>senses. There didn't seem to be anything wrong. He was just about to

>reply when he felt it. It was a sensation he had felt before, but not <br>for a while. Groaning in resignation, Ranma walked on.

><br>"There's nothing we can do. It's just the Kami. Every now and again

>they get playful and like to cause trouble. You wouldn't believe how  
<br>bad it was when I first got my curse."  
><br>"What does you're curse have to do with it? And what do you mean  
  
>'\_just\_ the Kami'?"<br>  
>"Well, my curse seems to have put some sort of cosmic 'Kick Me' sign  
on <br>my back. Whenever the Kami get bored, the like to annoy me."

><br>To punctuate his words, a cup of water fell from the level above  
him,  
>covering him in water. As he shrunk into his clothes, Ranma shrugged  
<br>and looked around. No-one seemed to have noticed. This time.

><br>"See? You can bet it was a real bitch when I was first cursed. I  
didn't  
>mind changing from a girl to a guy, I just didn't like the boiling  
<br>water that kept hitting me. Sometimes they stretched coincidence  
a  
>little too far.<br>"You know, I always figured that since the Kami  
were fairly quiet when  
>you started your work, it meant they approved or something. I always  
<br>saw that as a big cosmic tick mark for what you were trying. Can  
you  
>imagine how easy it must be for them to change me around now? Warm  
<br>water's good enough!"  
><br>Looking around for something to help him change, Ranma spotted a  
cafe.  
>As she nonchalantly walked past, Ranma snagged a cup of tea and  
<br>splashed herself. Rising and filling out his clothes, Ranma  
retreated  
>as quickly as possible. The little kid in there seemed just a little  
<br>too happy playing with his lemonade.  
><br>A few more minutes of searching turned up Makoto and Minako.  
Ahh, where  
>he finds two, he can find more. Walking up behind them, Ranma asked.  
<br>"Hi, everybody. Have you seen Rei-san around?"  
><br>Spinning around, the startled girls looked for Ranma. Even as  
she  
>turned, Makoto was babbling. "No, no, I wasn't looking at guys with  
<br>Mina-chan. We were just... Oh, Hotaru, it's you! You sounded so  
like  
>your brother then."<br>  
>Wiping her face, Hotaru grimaced. Damn kid from the cafe still  
managed <br>to get him somehow. In a voice drier than her hair,  
Hotaru deadpanned:  
>"Remarkable, isn't it? Have you seen Rei-san?"<br>  
>"No... Hotaru-chan, I want you to know I'm really sorry about  
Rei-<br>chan's fight with Ranma. We're all trying to get her to make  
up with  
>him, but she still refuses to even admit he exists."<br>  
>"It's OK. They're not fighting, Shampoo used a secret memory  
<br>manipulation Shiatsu technique on her. Don't worry, I'll cure it  
soon."  
><br>Minako smiled down at her. It was so sweet how she believed the  
story  
>Ranma had given her to cover up his fight with Rei. "Sure you are.  
Sure <br>you are. Well, Rei-chan should be over there. See? Third  
shop along."  
><br>Waving goodbye to the two girls, Hotaru found the shop they had

>indicated. Honestly, she could not have chosen a worse shop to pick.  
<br>Hotaru was willing to admit she wore women's clothes sometimes -

>getting men's clothes to fit her young female form was too annoying  
<br>after four hundred years - but did she really have to meet Rei in  
a

>lingerie shop?<br>

>Once inside the shop, Hotaru checked it for threats. Rei-san holding  
<br>some underwear: safe, well, safe so long as she doesn't look too

>closely. Shop assistant holding some wrapping paper: safe. Kids  
outside <br>with milkshakes: safe, she was already female, and she  
wasn't sure that

>milkshakes would work anyway. All in all it looked like she would be  
<br>worry free for a while. Now she just needed to hope that Rei  
remembered

>her while she was a girl.<br>

>"Rei-san?"<br>

>The taller girl looked down and smiled, holding forth something  
small <br>and lacy. "Hello, Hotaru-chan. What do you think about this  
one?"

><br>Hotaru turned bright red and looked away. "Ahh... Good... err  
that is,

>I'm sure it would look very nice... umm."<br>

>Hearing Rei's musical laugh, Hotaru risked a quick look. It was  
still a <br>bad time to be looking. Now Rei was holding it up front  
of her. "You're

>so silly! I didn't mean for you, I meant for me. But don't worry,  
soon <br>you'll be old enough to get some pretty things like these  
for

>yourself."<br>

>Turning even more red, Hotaru almost choked herself trying to hold  
back <br>the rushing feelings of disdain, merriment, confusion and  
perplexity.

>All she managed to do was start coughing as she tried to laugh and  
<br>start sprouting denials at the same time. Half doubled over with  
the

>image of her full sized male form wearing a little lace teddy  
designed <br>for a twelve year old, Hotaru did not even notice Rei  
approach.

><br>Only when Rei's arm went around her shoulders in concern was  
Hotaru

>able to get a decent grip on herself. Assuring the other girl that  
she <br>was fine, and it was just something she had swallowed the  
wrong way,

>Hotaru brought herself under control. Or as much under control as  
she <br>could get with Rei's warm arm around her shoulder, and some  
piece of

>women's underwear draped across her back.<br>

>"Rei-san, I have to talk to you about something really important.  
<br>Can... Can I meet you outside when you're finished?"

><br>Rei smiled down at the little angel. Hotaru was always so sweet,  
and

>besides, how could she deny anything for such a dedicated fan? "No  
<br>problem. I'll be right there."

><br>Things started well enough. Rei came out with a wrapped package  
in her

>hand. "Just one question before you start, Hotaru-chan... Why are  
you <br>wearing clothes that are so big?"

><br>Hotaru looked down. True, she was virtually swimming in her

normal

>Ranma clothes. "Would you believe me if I said that everything else was <br>in the wash?"

><br>Rei shook her head, plainly amused, but she did not press the point.

>They talked and walked for a little bit. Hotaru had managed to convince <br>Rei to return to her shrine early, saying that there was something

>important she needed to show her that she could not do in the shopping <br>centre. All was going well until disaster struck. Twice.

><br>They were walking along, minding their own business, when three

>horrible figures leapt through the roof of the mall and landed not to <br>far away. The sight of a pair of Daimons and one of the Witches 5 was

>enough to make anyone's blood run cold. At the thought of the Daimon's <br>being in Rei's presence, Hotaru's blood ran even colder.

><br>Not cold enough to prevent the second disaster, however. When they

>broke through the roof, the Daimons must have severed a water pipe. A <br>hot water pipe. With all the inevitable power of a force of nature, the

>water cascaded down, drenching the small girl. Since she was right <br>between Rei and the Daimons at the time, it also ensured that Rei

>received a perfect view of what happened.<br>

>Even as screams and cries begin all around them, Rei and Ranma faced <br>each other with dumbfounded expressions. After a moment, Ranma's

>changed to shame and depression. In the same instant, Rei's turned to <br>concern and even more confusion. "But... But...

Hotaru-chan?... What

>happened? How did you?... Where did you?... What?..."<br>

>"I... I'm sorry, Rei-san I can explain."<br>

>"What? Who are you? Where did Hotaru-chan go? She was here just a <br>moment ago."

><br>"I'm Ranma, it... it's my curse, Rei... I change into Hotaru when I get

>wet."<br>

>Rei stood there stunned for a few more moments until she was distracted <br>by the sounds of combat. A veritable legion of Senshi had appeared.

>Arrayed around the minions of evil were an almost full assortment of <br>the true Senshi, reinforced on one side by a trio of fakes.

Moving at

>enhanced speeds, the Senshi began to fight it out with their <br>adversaries, and sections of the mall began to suffer incidental

>damage.<br>

>Rei looked around for somewhere to change. She also needed to find <br>little Hotaru. The girl was her responsibility, and she would hate to

>see her hurt. After looking for a few seconds, the only person she

<br>could see nearby was a cute looking stranger in a red silk shirt.

>"Excuse me... Have you seen a little girl?"<br>

>"Err... I think she went that way..."<br>

>"Thanks!" Taking advantage of his advice, Rei dashed down a supply

<br>corridor and pulled out her henshin stick. She did not know if the man  
>had really seen the mysteriously vanishing girl, but it was the perfect <br>opportunity for her to transform and join the fight.

><br>Even with a full compliment of eight Senshi attacking the Witch and the  
>two Daimons, it was a slow and dangerous battle. The Witch was almost <br>immune to all of their attacks, and they could ill afford to be struck  
>by the Witch's attacks. <br>  
>Within a minute, all of them had been injured to some extent. Even the <br>mighty Outer Senshi had managed to take a beating, but they were  
>winning. Although Jupiter and Venus had been taken out of the fight, <br>one of the Daimons was dead, and the other was heavily wounded.

><br>By the end of the battle, Sailor Mercury had used her Bubble Blast six  
>times to allow them to recover and regroup. Sailor Uranus was holding <br>her left arm as though it hurt, but she was still up and fighting. When  
>Mimete had lost both of her Daimons - and saw herself facing six Senshi <br>with their two gentlemen supporters still fresh and in the wings - she  
>decided it was time to retreat. Although she was only lightly wounded, <br>there was no real chance she would win. Worse, her quarry had vanished,  
>saved by the delay the Senshi had caused.<br>  
>With a flourish, Mimete jumped back through the hole in the roof she <br>had arrived in. Gratefully the Senshi gathered their friends and began  
>to retreat. They had won this round, but without Sailor Moon <br>transforming into her Super Sailor form, they had little real chance of  
>destroying Mimete. Her time would come, and they would be there to make <br>sure of it.  
><br>Changed back into their normal forms, the Inner Senshi met up outside  
>the mall. Rei was in need of a rest. Two attacks in one day had <br>exhausted her, and she needed to recover. Bidding the other girls

>goodnight, Rei separated and left for her shrine.<br>  
>In the afternoon light, she was followed by a tall figure in a short <br>skirt. She in turn was followed by a young man in a red shirt. Once off  
>the less public thoroughfares Rei was stopped by Sailor Pluto. Seeing <br>his friend in danger yet again, Ranma began to power up a Ki blast.  
>They were almost motionless and if he could get a good hit on Setsuna, <br>he may be able to kill her while she was unprepared.

><br>Too far away to be able to make out their whispered words, Ranma was  
>almost ready to fire when he saw something that made him stop. The evil <br>impostor had pulled a bottle of shampoo from a pocket, and was about to  
>give a willing Rei another dose of Xai Fang Gao. Or perhaps not. If <br>Shampoo had been fooled by her disguise, it was almost possible the  
the



>Amazon had taught one of the Sailors the cure. When you added in his  
<br>conversation with Michiru this morning...  
><br>Swallowing his Ki again, Ranma descended to the street and  
approached  
>the pair. By the time he arrived, Setsuna was finished and turned to  
<br>face him. "We are not your enemies, Ranma. Do not try and make us  
  
>enemies, and do not make the mistake of thinking you can follow me  
<br>without my knowledge."  
><br>Rei turned around and looked at him. He felt like crying when he  
saw  
>the look of recognition in her eyes. Suddenly the look turned to  
<br>horror, and he knew she must have remembered what happened to him  
in  
>the mall.<br>  
>"Oh no! Ranma, your little sister was with me in the mall when it  
was <br>attacked. But she just vanished. I'm so sorry! I couldn't  
find her.  
>Come on, let's go back, maybe we can find her if we keep  
looking."<br>  
>Inside, Ranma cheered at the effectiveness of Shampoo's technique.  
It <br>had really saved his skin this time, despite all the problems  
it had  
>caused. "It's OK, Rei-san. I found her before I followed this  
woman."<br>  
>With a nod of her head, the Senshi in question turned and ran into  
the <br>distance. It had shaken her badly when Ranma had seemingly  
appeared  
>from nowhere. She resolved to spend more time working on her more  
<br>mundane skills. There should be no way that a young pup of twenty  
could  
>sneak up on a woman as old and skilled as her.<br>  
>Watching Setsuna vanish into the distance, Ranma was filled with  
<br>conflicting emotions. Love, happiness, confusion, hatred and  
amazement.  
>All that he really knew was that he had Rei-san back, and it was the  
<br>pernicious Setsuna that had done it. As much as it stuck in his  
throat,  
>he owed her. He knew their paths would cross again; on that day he  
knew <br>she would use up whatever good will she had generated today.

><br>\* \* \*

><br>It was dark again. Dark and ominous. With trepidation, Mimete  
and  
>Souichi entered the throne room. Once more the shadowed figure of  
<br>Mistress 9 dominated everything, and the two servants cringed.  
They had  
>failed. Failed completely. Because of them, there was no way that  
<br>Master Pharaoh 90 would enter this world. All was lost.

><br>Neither of them spoke, hoping to generate whatever last seconds  
of life  
>that they could. They knew they would die. For a failure this great  
<br>there could be no other punishment. The only question was whether  
they  
>would die quickly, or slowly and painfully.<br>  
>In the small area of light that shone on the bottom half of her  
face, <br>Mistress 9 smiled. That was all it took to start Mimete's  
knees  
>shaking. She was smiling. It was worse than they ever suspected.

Their <br>deaths would set new records for pain and suffering. Mimete gave a  
>small whimper.<br>  
>"Well done, my servants. Although you did not manage to cure Hino Rei, <br>it is thanks to your actions that the disaster has been averted."  
><br>"I... I don't understand."  
><br>"It is well that you do not. Suffice it to say that while you wasted  
>three of our precious Daimons, victory shall be ours. Spare no effort: <br>get me the Heart Crystals I need to complete my domination of this  
>body!"<br>  
>---<br>End Of Chapter.  
><br>  
><br>  
> <p><p>

## 24. Bringing It Together

The characters contained within this story are owned by Takahashi

>Rumiko and Takeuchi Naoko. No infringement of copyright is intended.  
<br>This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the current  
>author.<br>  
>Thanks to my pre-readers:<br>Ben  
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>This story is dedicated to the letter N the number  
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> \_\_\_\_\_<br> / \  
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \ \_\_\_\_\_/  
><br>

><br>What has gone before:

>While on a training trip with his father during the late 1600s, Ranma <br>fell into the spring of the drowned young girl. Unfortunately, his

>curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he  
<br>has spent most of his time in his cursed form. Not only that, but

>because the spring was drowned \_young\_ girl, he turns into a 12 year  
<br>old girl who never ages.

><br>In the present...

>Ranma has received a partial cure for his curse by the spirit entity  
<br>called Mistress 9. She will eventually take his girl's body, freeing

>him entirely, so now he poses as Tomoe Hotaru. Unfortunately, he now  
<br>seems to have a few problems with the ladies, since he is inadvertently

>engaged to Hino Rei (he's taking lessons in Shinto), his old buddy  
<br>Ucchan, and the friendly Amazon Shampoo. That doesn't even start to

>include Mako-chan, or the fact that two of his best friends are only  
<br>three foot tall: Cologne and Chibi-Usa.  
><br>Ranma's problems are increasing daily. He now remembers being  
Saturn  
>Knight, a borderline psychotic noble from the Moon Kingdom... too  
bad <br>that Saturn Knight and Sailor Mars are falling for each  
other. Not only  
>that, but Saturn Knight, Ranma, and Hotaru (as different persona)  
have <br>all been having problems with the Outer Senshi. Last  
episode, Ranma saw  
>Sailor Pluto cure Rei of the Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu technique. Why  
Pluto? <br>Because she had watched one of the Witches 5 and her  
Daimons beat the  
>cure from Shampoo and Cologne. Why did the Witches want it? Read  
DC23 <br>to find out.  
><br>-----  
>Bringing It Together<br>-----  
><br>As Hotaru walked down the street to her destination, she felt  
worried  
>and depressed. Things seemed to be coming to a head at the moment,  
and <br>she was not sure that they were going well. Actually, despite  
a recent  
>victory for the Sailors, overall things were pretty grim. Despite a  
<br>down turn in events, Hotaru could see the light at the end of the  
  
>tunnel, and that end was getting closer every day.<br>  
>It was now three days since the attack on Cologne, and the poor girl  
<br>was still in hospital. Ranma had visited her every day, usually  
staying  
>for several hours by her bedside. Often he would talk about what he  
<br>remembered of life in the village, or read her the newspaper. The  
  
>doctors kept promising she would come out of her coma any day now.  
Just <br>watching Cologne in the bed hurt him. To him, she would  
always be the  
>bouncing little child, the sweet teenager who looked up to him.  
Seeing <br>her lying in the stark white hospital bed made her seem  
old and  
>fragile. <br>  
>No matter how much he hated to see Cologne brought low like this, he  
<br>did not begrudge a single second spent with her. She was his  
oldest and  
>dearest friend. She was a tie to a life of happiness in the days of  
his <br>youth. Although Shampoo was a Joketsuzoku also, she did not  
bring back  
>the memories the way Cologne did. Besides, in the half hour or hour  
<br>that their visits coincided, Shampoo seemed to offer more  
attention to  
>him than her own great grandmother. He could not blame her, because  
<br>that was how she was raised, but Ranma had once promised himself  
that  
>he did not want to sit around and watch as Cologne died of old age.  
Now <br>that was exactly what he was doing and he wished Shampoo  
could really  
>understand the depth of his suffering.<br>  
>Added on top of Cologne's coma was a sense of dread. Yesterday the  
<br>Sailors seemed to have won a great victory: finally defeating  
Witch  
>Mimete. The only problem was that it was her successor - Witch Tellu  
- <br>that had actually killed her. Again the Sailors had been in

dire

>straits, but before Mimete could take advantage of her latest plan,  
<br>Tellu had pulled the plug on her. Literally pulled the plug,  
since  
>Mimete had contrived to enter a giant TV and was planning on using  
the <br>power she had by the direct connection to Tokyo's power grid.

><br>It was the fact that the Sailors had never actually defeated one  
of the

>Witches in direct combat gave him the sense of dread. Kaolinite had  
<br>apparently fallen to her doom from Tokyo tower, Eudial defeated  
by

>Mimete's sabotage and a car accident, and now Mimete had been killed  
by <br>Tellu. Each time their adversary became stronger, but the  
Senshi

>remained the same. It was only through their devotion and will power  
<br>that they could hope to compete.

><br>But how strong would Tellu prove to be?

><br>At least he was back to getting lessons from that tomboy  
priestess.

>Rei-san had fully recovered from the Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu technique  
<br>Shampoo had used. She had really hit the roof when he had told  
her that

>she had seen his curse. True, because of the memory prevention  
<br>technique Rei could not remember seeing it, but that was not  
Ranma's

>fault. The last couple of days he had been getting great enjoyment  
over <br>mocking her. She was the only one around who had seen his  
curse, and

>she did not know what it was. Unfortunately, he was the only one  
that <br>found it hilarious.

><br>Even though she was a tomboy, Rei-san did not have the strength  
needed

>to defend herself against the Daimons. Hell, she'd need to be one of  
<br>the Sailors just to be safe, and there was no way that a simple  
temple

>maiden had that much power. In the previous week she had been  
attacked <br>not once, but twice by the forces of evil. That was  
enough to make

>Ranma shiver in fear for her. The good fortune of having strong  
allies <br>appearing could not continue forever, and that might mean  
that someday

>her luck would run out.<br>

>Ranma's only real hope was Mimete had borne Rei-san a personal  
grudge <br>for some reason. Perhaps she bought a faulty charm once.  
Ranma knew

>just how poorly they worked: every charm for clear weather and no  
rain <br>that he had tried, had failed. If he was lucky, Tellu would  
not follow

>in Mimete's footsteps, but luck was something he had learned not to  
<br>count on a long time ago.

><br>If all of that was not enough, Mistress 9 was saying that she  
was

>having a hard time getting the energy she needed to complete the  
<br>separation of his halves. She assured him it would happen;  
Mistress 9

>had once hoped that she might be able to complete it ahead of  
schedule, <br>but that was not to be. She would complete it, she  
guaranteed him.

><br>To keep things complicated, Ucchan's was being rebuilt, and poor

Ukyo

>was forced to live in a hotel temporarily. Ranma had wanted to offer  
<br>her a place to stay with the Tomoes, but Hotaru's 'father' had ruled

>that out summarily. So now she spent long days supervising construction <br>or doing some casual work at another Okonomiyaki shop.

><br>Hotaru was walking up the stairs to the front door when she reached

>what she hoped was the last of her real problems: the three girls that <br>were trying to pass themselves off as fighters for love and justice

>like his pretty Sailor Mars. Being a Sailor was not about wearing a <br>short skirt and having magical powers - although that did seem to be

>important. What really mattered was attitude. Queen Serenity and her <br>warriors fought for love and justice, and that ruled to others out.

>Haruka, Setsuna and Michiru fought for their own hidden goals; to them <br>it was the destination, not the journey.

><br>The real pretty soldiers knew that it did not matter if you reached the

>end of your voyage, so long as you travelled correctly. Failure was <br>something to be avoided, but years in Poland had taught Ranma that

>phrases like 'sacrifices must be made', 'the end justifies the means', <br>and 'at any cost' were something that should never be in the vocabulary

>of people in power. Although he had never asked any of them, his Sailor <br>Mars would never be willing to let someone sacrifice their life for

>hers. From the way that they acted, the three older girls seemed quite <br>willing to let some people make the 'right' sacrifices.

><br>Placing her hand upon the door-bell, Hotaru firmly pushed all of these

>depressing thoughts down. Even as the door chimed, Hotaru managed a <br>smile. The other day she was sorting through her drawers and had come

>across something she knew would bring a smile to her face: her <br>paintings of Akane. They were done something like three hundred years

>ago in the Amazon village. Ever since then they had been sealed inside <br>a greased and waxed leather case. After seeing how age had affected

>some of the Amazon's books, Ranma had long ago decided that such an <br>event would never occur to her last images of Akane.

><br>The sound of running feet announced the arrival of Ranma's hope for

>restoring the pictures. It was one's of the tomboy's friends, and the <br>smartest girl Ranma had ever met. He had met her a few times at Rei-

>san's or Chibi-Usa's, and she always seemed nice and sweet. She might <br>get recruited as a Sailor girl with attitudes like those. Hotaru was

>laughing to herself at the joke as the door opened; someone as gentle <br>as Ami did not seem the sort to be able to fight against demons.

><br>"Hello, Ami-san!"

><br>"Hello, Hotaru-chan. What a surprise to see you here. Are you

lost?"

><br>"No, I came here to see you. I was wondering if you could help me with

>something?"<br>

>"Sure, Hotaru-chan. Come on inside and tell me what I can do."<br>

>Stopping past the kitchen to layer a plate in biscuits her mother had <br>bought and left for her, Ami led them to her room. It was a nice room,

>just as spotlessly tidy as Hotaru would have expected from such an <br>organised girl. Taking one of the cookies and munching away, Hotaru sat

>on Ami's bed idly looking at all of the books on her shelves and <br>stacked on her desk.

><br>"Wow, you must be so smart, reading all the time. I wish I knew more

>than I did."<br>

>Ami blushed and covered her mouth in embarrassment. "Well, if you keep <br>studying and do your school work, I'm sure that you'll do well."

><br>After a couple more minutes of mindless small talk, and a few

>compliments to bolster Ami's faith in herself, Hotaru got to the point. <br>"Ami-san, I have some really old pictures, and I was hoping you could

>give me some help getting them framed properly."<br>

>"You didn't need me for that Hotaru-chan. Any painting shop sells <br>frames. You could have done it yourself; it's fun too."

><br>"No, no, no! These are really old pictures. I've got three of them,

>and their about three hundred years old. It's just that some canvases <br>are supposed to get really brittle if they're too old, and I remem- I

>suspect that these ones are weak already. Here. They're sealed in this <br>tube."

><br>Hotaru handed the older girl a tube of some strange brown/black

>substance. It was a foot and a half long, and a couple of inches thick. <br>Holding the tube in a delicate and slightly disgusted manner, Ami

>examined it closely. The surface was lumpy and irregular, covered in <br>some thick, smooth and slightly greasy substance. There was also no

>sign of how to get the pictures in or out.<br>

>"Err... How do you know there are pictures in here?"<br>

>"Umm..." That was a tricky one. She really should have considered it <br>before she arrived. "It's been... entrusted into my family... since

>they were first taken down."<br>

>Hotaru looked so earnest, Ami sincerely hoped that there were pictures <br>in there. "Well, I don't want to get your hopes up, but I could

>probably cut this stuff away..."<br>

>"Please don't... The reason I came to you is because I knew you would <br>be smart enough to be able to tell me who did this sort painting

>restoration work. That case has been sealed in wax and grease to <br>protect them. Every few years - when it was starting to wear out - it

>would be renewed. Its been one of my regular jobs now for quite a  
<br>while.

>"What I really want is some way of preserving the paintings so that  
I <br>can look at them, without them falling apart over time."

><br>Holding the tube more carefully - even if only to avoid touching  
old

>animal grease - Ami looked at it more closely. "Well... I know a few  
<br>people from the art gallery... and the museum might be able to  
help,

>but a proper restoration - the sort of treatment you need - is  
really <br>expensive."

><br>Hotaru waved a hand. "It's only money. It's the paintings that  
are

>irreplaceable."<br>

>"You don't understand. It might cost 100,000 yen or more!"<br>

>"Oh, is that all? Here." Hotaru passed her an American Express card.

<br>"This is set to draw straight from an account Ranma set up. If  
you need

>more than \$300,000 US, you'll have to get approval, but don't let  
that <br>stop you. The pictures are worth it."

><br>"Th-- three hundred thousand US!? Do you realise how much that  
is in

>Yen?"<br>

>"Sure, I helped draw up the papers for it. Ami, you have to  
understand: <br>these paintings are the finest works of art from the  
greatest painter

>in two generations of the Joketsuzoku. The girl in the paintings is  
the <br>most beautiful woman in all of Japan during the sixteenth  
century.

>Besides, there's all sorts of money in Ranma's name floating around.  
<br>If... if we can succeed, I thinks it's time to spend some of it."

><br>Ami's eyes were as large as saucers as she clutched the tube.  
That came

>to over forty million yen. Forty million yen, and Hotaru had just  
<br>handed it to her. She might have had doubts once, but if she and  
her

>brother were willing to give her this much money to spend, they must  
be <br>serious. For that much money, you could buy some of the most  
famous

>paintings in the world. <br>

>Actually, it was just as strange that Hotaru and Ranma were that  
rich. <br>She had seen the Tomoe home and while it was not small, it  
did not

>speak of this much money. Even then, Hotaru had clearly said that it  
<br>was Ranma's money, not her father's. Momentarily, Ami wondered if  
Ranma

>was actually adopted by Tomoe Souichi. It would explain a lot of  
<br>things: his money, why he did not live there now, his travel in  
his

>early years. Maybe Rei knew...<br>

>Coming out of her speculations with a quick shake, Ami gave Hotaru a  
<br>confident smile. "Leave it in my hands, Hotaru-chan. I'll speak  
to some

>friends and see if they can do it. Trust me, since it's this  
important <br>to you, we'll be very careful."

><br>Engulfing the girl in a big hug, Hotaru held her tightly. Wiping  
a

>small tear from her eye, Hotaru smiled. At last, after three hundred  
<br>years of waiting, she would be able to see pictures of Akane  
again.  
><br>Having left Ami's house, it was time to take another trip to the  
  
>hospital. Cologne-chan would probably still be unconscious, but  
Hotaru <br>could read to her or something. Poor little Cologne-chan:  
attacked by  
>Witches in a strange country, surrounded by foreigners, all alone  
when <br>Shampoo needed to work on finding a husband. Even if she  
could not hear  
>the words, Hotaru knew Cologne-chan appreciated her presence.<br>  
  
>Walking into Cologne's room, Hotaru was positively delighted. She  
was <br>awake! Cologne was up and sitting in bed drinking some juice.  
Throwing  
>herself across the room, the two small women held each other. <br>  
  
>"I... I was so worried about you, Cologne-chan. The reason I left  
the <br>village was I couldn't stand to see my friends dying, and  
here you  
>go... I'm just so glad you're OK again."<br>  
>Cologne held her friend. For the first twenty years of her life,  
Hotaru <br>had always been a mother or a big sister to her. Since  
then she had  
>bore her own children, and known the agony of watching them pass  
away. <br>Returning the hug, Cologne soothed her friend, telling her  
it was all  
>right. <br>  
>Later the two ancient Amazons - one showing her age and the other  
not - <br>shared the bed and sat talking. Cologne talked of her  
battle and the  
>dangers in the city these days. Shampoo had been in earlier, and was  
<br>there when she had awoken. While Shampoo was there, she had told  
  
>Cologne how her husband had already hunted down the people that had  
<br>attacked them.  
><br>"Is it true, Soap? Is it true that you took on the woman and her  
  
>monsters?"<br>  
>"Well, not by myself, but yeah, I did. One of them anyway. I was  
there <br>when the Sailors killed the others. Until I bumped into  
Shampoo two  
>days ago, I did not even know anything had happened to you."<br>  
  
>"Mmm. Well, it is good that one of the Joketsuzoku was there to see  
to <br>their end. Amazon justice must be maintained. Thank you....  
  
>Congratulations too, they are most powerful opponents."<br>  
  
>Bowing her head slightly, Hotaru admired her hands. "More powerful  
than <br>you may ever know. I'm in this pretty tightly at the moment.  
You can't  
>tell anyone, but I know one of the Sailors... well, not exactly know  
<br>her, more like we talk some times. Anyway, recently I've been in  
some  
>of the fights, and they're not good news. These people are  
dangerous, <br>Cologne-chan. If you ever see them again... be  
careful."  
><br>Cologne nodded. "How about you? Are you careful?"



><br>"As careful as I can be. I won't lie to you, it's dangerous, but then,  
>life is dangerous... Do you remember when we first met in Japan? You  
<br>didn't know who was and I challenged you to a fight."

><br>Cologne nodded her head. It had come as quite a series of shocks. This  
>young upstart male firstly had the audacity to challenge her, then he  
<br>made it worse by not loosing straight away. Only after a long and  
>tiring battle, did he reveal that he was actually her long time friend  
<br>whom she had thought was dead for many years.

><br>Hotaru passed her a large scroll that she had pulled from within her  
>shirt. Wordlessly, Cologne took it and looked at the words covering the  
<br>wax seal. 'Saotome Secret Techniques'.  
><br>"My father was a great man. Before I was born, he designed two entirely  
>new sets of martial arts techniques. Techniques so powerful, so deadly,  
<br>and so dangerous he asked that they be sealed away. Never to be used  
>other than in my darkest hour.<br>"I warn you now, these techniques require great inner strength and  
>great prowess even to learn. Even Akane only ever managed to learn the  
<br>Yama Sen Ken, and a few of the moves from the Umi Sen Ken. She and I  
>trained together for many years, so these aren't the sort of thing that  
<br>can be mastered overnight."  
><br>Cologne took the scroll in her hands and prepared to break the seal.  
>She knew her friend had some mighty techniques that she was entirely  
<br>happy to use. If this was a set that even she was scared to use, they  
>must be lethal in the extreme. Before she could crack the wax, a small  
<br>hand rested on top of hers.  
><br>"My father asked me never to pass on his knowledge to anyone other than  
>my wife or my children. I... I've never had children, but I've always  
<br>thought of you as my daughter and my best friend. What I'm doing these  
>days is dangerous. I'm not always sure that we'll come out on top, and  
<br>I don't want the techniques that we developed to be lost. If... if  
>something happens to me, these are yours to use as you see fit."<br>

>Cologne nodded and looked down at the parchment in her hands. It was a  
<br>very fine quality paper, obviously the best available. Sitting here,  
>holding the secrets of hundreds of years in her hands, Cologne could  
<br>feel the temptation challenging her soul. Turning her head, she looked  
>at Hotaru: there might be a way to get some hints on what was in the  
<br>scroll. "You said 'we'. I thought your father developed these."

><br>"Pops developed the first two of them. The core of the techniques. I've  
>learned a lot since then, and I've found ways to improve things. I've  
<br>added three techniques to the series to round them out..."

><br>Sighing, Hotaru lay back and looked at the ceiling. The scroll she had  
>given Cologne held so much of her life. So many memories, the results <br>of so many years of studying the art. Even if something were to happen  
>to her now, she would live forever in the Joketsuzoku's memories.<br>  
>"Before I was even born, my father designed two sets of Martial Arts <br>techniques. The groundwork was laid while he was courting my mother,  
>and he perfected them in the first few years of my life when he started <br>my training journey. Later on I added three more sets to make it  
>complete, one for each of the elements: earth, air, fire, water, and <br>metal.  
>"The first of these techniques was the Yama Sen Ken. The Thousand Fist <br>Mountain. It's the simplest of the collection. The Yama Sen Ken is  
>Earth. It is simple, straight forward, and designed for the demolition <br>of opponents, buildings... anything really.  
>"Next is the Umi Sen Ken. The Thousand Fist Sea. Like water it is <br>softer and more flexible than earth. It relies on stealth, trickery,  
>subtlety and precision in it's attacks."<br>  
>Ranma settled into a more comfortable position. She silently wished <br>that the real Hotaru had not been such a girly sort of girl.  
Lying down  
>in skirts was really annoying; if you weren't careful, you kept showing <br>people all sorts of things they should not see.

><br>"The Kotetsu Sen Ha, or Thousand Blade Steel, is probably perfect for  
>Shampoo. Shampoo likes to fight with weapons, and that's what this set <br>is about. Pops probably could have come up with them, but he always  
>taught me to fight bare handed. Bare hands gives you lots of <br>flexibility, but I have to admit there are advantages to weapons. It's  
>sort of like the Yama Sen Ken adapted to use with greater reach and <br>bladed attacks.  
>"The two hardest techniques in the collection are limited to only a few <br>people who could ever learn them... they're just too hard. I think you  
>could learn the Kaze Sen Ken. The Thousand Fist Wind is a series of <br>linked attacks for using Ki in combat. I know you can do the Moko

>Takabisha, so you should be able to manage these with some training."<br>  
>When Cologne looked at her with greater interest, Hotaru shrugged. "I <br>won't go into details, but it's not really a series of attacks, it's  
>more a new way of doing things. It makes you better and faster. It lets <br>you deliver Ki in every attack you do, and it's designed to be as soft  
>and subtle as the wind when necessary. Done properly, some of the <br>attacks will leave your opponent dead before they realise that they  
>have been attacked."<br>  
>Looking at the younger woman seriously, Hotaru tried to convince <br>Cologne with her eyes as much as her words. "The Hi Sen Ken is

the

>Thousand Fist Fire. It's a series of magical attacks that I doubt  
<br>anyone other than myself or the Sailor girls could perform. Even  
they

>would have trouble because of the Martial side of it, despite the  
fact <br>that they have more magical power than I do.

>"Be very careful if you try these. They are just as dangerous to you  
as <br>your opponent. There are at least four techniques in then that  
are

>designed to exhaust every ounce of magical energy from you body. One  
of <br>those is a suicide attack too... I've never managed to figure  
out what

>you'd use it on... but it's there."<br>

>Both the women sat silently and contemplated the scroll after that.  
One <br>was young on the outside, but today she was feeling every day  
of her

>age inside. The other was withered and ancient outside, but inside  
she <br>was giggling like a school girl. She might be a Matriarch of  
the

>Amazons, but she was still a martial artist, and the thought of  
being <br>handed a treasury of new techniques made her feel as young  
as Shampoo.

><br>They were still there several minutes later when Shampoo walked  
in.

>"Aiyaa! Little Sister in bed with Great Grandmother! We be such good  
<br>friends! Shampoo have so much to teach you."

><br>Upon entering the room, Shampoo had launched herself onto the  
now

>crowded hospital bed and proceeded to cling onto Hotaru in a  
<br>enthusiastic - though sisterly - hug. Now the three of them were  
there,

>with Hotaru being held tightly to the curvaceous body of the  
friendly <br>Amazon girl.

><br>"Shampoo! I'm not your little sister."

><br>"You Husband's sister, that make you Shampoo sister."

><br>"I ain't gunna marry you Shampoo!"

><br>"Not, you, Husband. Husband marry Shampoo."

><br>"I just said I ain't marrying you."

><br>"Little Sister confused. Shampoo marry husband, then you little

>sister."<br>

>As Hotaru attempted to grapple with the idea of being married to  
<br>someone and being their little sister at the same time, Cologne  
placed

>a hand on her arm and whispered in her ear: "Remember, Shampoo  
doesn't <br>know about your curse."

><br>"Whoops, sorry. I'm just used to this sort of treatment when I'm  
a guy.

>Let's try this again: Shampoo, Ranma's not going to marry you."<br>

>"Husband will. Shampoo show him she best choice. All go back to  
China, <br>all be too too happy."

><br>Switching to Chinese to make it easier for the girl, Hotaru  
continued

>to try and explain the situation... without actually giving away the  
<br>facts. "Shampoo, neither Ranma or I want him to marry you now.  
These

>too much happening at the moment. I... Ranma's going to be cured of  
his <br>curse soon. Until then, you have to believe me: you don't  
want to marry

>him."<br>  
>Shampoo smiled and gave Hotaru an extra squeeze. "You're such a  
clever <br>girl! You've already learned my language so that you can  
come back to  
>China with us? I'm so happy!"<br>  
>Trying to avoid thinking about the soft flesh that pressed against  
her <br>in all sort of interesting ways, Hotaru looked over at  
Cologne. "Did  
>she understand a word I just said?"<br>  
>"Shampoo is a very happy girl. I think she just likes to see the  
best <br>in every situation."  
><br>On that pleasant note, Hotaru announced it time for her to leave  
  
>Cologne in Shampoo's capable hands. After both of the other women  
<br>extracted promises for Hotaru to return soon, she was allowed to  
leave.  
>Needless to say, under the combined ministrations of Japanese  
medical <br>system, Shampoo's caring, and both Cologne and Hotaru's  
knowledge, the  
>sprightly old lady made a rapid recovery. In under two days she was  
up <br>and around, bouncing on her cane. By the end of three days,  
the  
>hospital staff were more than willing to release her.<br>  
>It was at this point in time, just three days after Hotaru had given  
<br>her the pictures, that Ami came knocking on the Tomoe family  
door. When  
>Hotaru answered, she was amazed to see a veritable wall of brown  
paper. <br>Looking up, she saw a pair of laughing blue eyes just  
crested the top  
>of the wrapping paper. Over the eyes was a covering of short  
blue-black <br>hair that swayed gently in the light breeze of the  
afternoon.  
><br>"Hello, Hotaru-chan! Look what I've got."  
><br>"Err... You robbed a paper shop?"  
><br>"No, silly. It's your pictures. I picked them up from the  
gallery  
>today."<br>  
>"Really?! You've really got them? But it's so quick!"<br>  
>Ami's eyes crinkled as she smiled. "I've really got them. The people  
at <br>the gallery said it was pretty easy to do, even if they don't  
need to  
>do it too often. They just cut open the case you gave me and laid  
them <br>out. They're all properly framed now, and they guarantee  
that they  
>won't fall apart over time. So... do you want to stay out here and  
talk <br>about them, or go inside and have a look?..."  
><br>In stunned silence, Ami watched as sick little Hotaru grabbed  
all three  
>of the pictures in their heavy frames and carried them inside. Even  
Ami <br>who was three years older and in perfect health thought they  
were a  
>burden. Hotaru was pretty strong for such a little girl. "Come on,  
Ami-<br>san! Come up to my room!"  
><br>Walking through the house behind Hotaru, Ami struggled to place  
the  
>feeling of dread that seemed to permeate the house. Something about  
the <br>place seemed slightly off; as though someone was waiting for  
something,  
>something of world shattering importance. As Ami was walking into  
<br>Hotaru's room, sounds of laughter echoed up the stairs. Terrible,

>insane laughter. The sort of laughter that set your teeth on edge and  
<br>made you want to run for the local asylum.  
><br>"W-Who was that?"  
><br>"One of my father's 'friends'. Every now and again he seems to  
have  
>some woman over. I guess he's just lonely. I've never met any of  
them, <br>but this one seems worse than most. Anyway, don't worry  
about her!  
>Let's take a look at these pictures!"<br>  
>Hotaru had laid out the three paper covered frames against the wall,  
<br>largest in the middle, with a small one on either side. Even  
though she  
>held her fingers poised above the paper and almost quivered in  
<br>excitement, Hotaru paused and looked at Ami. "Thank you. I don't  
know  
>what else I can say. It's been so long that I've wanted to see these  
<br>pictures. I... Thank you."  
><br>Blushing furiously at the praise for doing something so simple,  
Ami  
>avoided Hotaru's eyes and made a small waving gesture. "It's OK.  
<br>Honestly. Well, there no need to wait any longer. Let's take a  
look."  
><br>Nodding, Hotaru gave a single long sweep, tearing the butcher's  
paper  
>from the top of the largest frame to its base. In the light of the  
<br>room, the gold frame glinted, but it was the picture that  
captured  
>everyone's attention. It was a woman; she had large, liquid brown  
eyes, <br>and a cheeky smile. Short-cropped black hair covered her  
head in an  
>almost identical cut to Ami's. <br>  
>Seeing Hotaru was entranced by the picture of the woman in her  
<br>twenties, Ami tried to remember what she had said about the  
person in  
>the portrait. 'The most beautiful woman in all Japan...' Casting a  
<br>critical eye over the picture, Ami wondered about that. Sure, she  
was  
>nice, quite cute really, but to be honest, she did not look as good  
as <br>Minako or Rei. Besides, a yellow martial arts Gi was hardly  
the sort of  
>stunning clothing you expected a model to wear. And that hair; it  
might <br>be acceptable now to have short hair, but most of the  
refined ladies  
>hundreds of years ago kept theirs very long.<br>  
>On the other hand, Ami had to agree with Hotaru's statement that the  
<br>artist was very good. The tones and textures were superb, and the  
  
>subject seemed to have an almost lifelike quality. In much the same  
way <br>as the Mona Lisa watched you wherever you went, this woman  
seemed to  
>smile at you - you personally - wherever you were.<br>  
>Only because the house was so silent did Ami hear the quietly  
whispered <br>word that Hotaru uttered. "Akane." That was all, one  
word. But it was  
>one word that was sufficient to bring tears to the young girl's  
face. <br>After a moment, she turned away from the painting and sat  
on her bed.  
>"Thank you, Ami-san. It means so much to me to be able to see these  
<br>pictures."

><br>Ami sat beside Hotaru and put an arm around her shoulders. Tears  
>continued to fall down the girl's face but she was not crying,  
moreover <br>it seemed that she simply could not contain the depth of  
her emotion.  
>"Who is she?"<br>  
>"Her name was Akane, and she was the greatest girl to ever study  
<br>Anything Goes Martial Arts." Glancing between the picture and  
Ami,  
>Hotaru lowered her brows in mock concentration. "Real tomboy type:  
Rei-<br>san would like her. Come to think of it, Ami-san... you look  
a lot like  
>Akane. Don't tell me you're a tomboy too."<br>  
>Ami gave a short laugh. "No, I'm nice and sweet. Or I try to be."  
<br>  
>Looking back at the picture, Hotaru sighed then whispered to  
herself. <br>"A spirit of fire or a tomboy... The choices we have to  
make."  
><br>Ami stayed a while longer, and then looked at the other two  
pictures.  
>Both were obviously the same woman, just an older and younger  
version. <br>When Ami walked out the door, her brow furrowed in  
concentration. She  
>knew she had heard the name Akane before, and it was something to do  
<br>with Ranma. Not only that, but the face looked familiar. Maybe it  
was  
>just because she looked so much like Ami herself. As her brilliant  
mind <br>struggled to find the last, slippery clue she had, Ami  
walked home. She  
>knew she had the answer, it was on the tip of her tongue... Now if  
she <br>could just remember it.  
><br>Back in the house, Hotaru knelt down and placed a small kiss on  
the  
>glass covering of the picture. "Hello again, Akane. I've missed you.  
We <br>have so much to talk about."  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>No-one could deny that Witch Tellu was a fast worker. The very  
day  
>after Witch Mimete's demise, she had presented Tomoe Souichi with a  
<br>foolproof plan to capture more Heart Crystals than Mistress 9  
could  
>possibly need. Needless to say, she had also devised the perfect way  
to <br>deal with those pesky Sailor Senshi should they intervene.  
Nothing  
>would be able to stop her!<br>  
>At least, that was what she told her master. <br>  
>As cause for great concern to the Senshi, had they known, she was  
also <br>right. Just four days after killing Mimete, Witch Tellu was  
ready and  
>able to strike. Using her powers combined with the Daimons created  
by <br>Tomoe, she had made an army of demon plants. Plants with only  
one goal  
>in their teeny-tiny vegetable minds: steal Heart Crystals.<br>  
  
>Acquiring a warehouse and setting up her plants had been the work of  
a <br>single night. By Wednesday afternoon, Tellu's Botanical Gardens  
had  
>been completed, and the grand opening was being advertised for that  
<br>night.  
><br>As night fell and the moon rose in the sky, Tellu stood in the

entrance

>to her garden and watched the people queuing outside. Her  
advertising <br>had worked perfectly. All of her plants were  
exceptionally beautiful,  
>not to mention unique in their appearance. Now the foolish cattle  
that <br>populated the city were clamouring to see them. Fools! If  
only they  
>knew what awaited them! Soon she, Tellu, would rule beside Master  
<br>Pharaoh 90 when he came into this world. When he was told it was  
her  
>that performed such valuable service, no reward would be too  
great.<br>  
>Laughing with the simple pleasure of thinking about everyone bowing  
<br>down as she passed, Tellu threw open the door to her warehouse.  
The  
>gardening enthusiasts, the botanists, even the people who just  
<br>appreciated pretty flowers all raced inside to see her remarkable

>display. <br>

>As the people began to circulate through the warehouse, Tellu  
smiled. <br>Soon she would give the command for her plants to attack.  
When they

>did, she could harvest all of their Heart Crystals. Even if the  
vaunted <br>Senshi arrived they would be no problem to her, despite  
the

>difficulties they had caused her sister Witches. Hidden among her  
<br>lovely garden was a killer plant. A Daimon more powerful than  
ever

>before, drawing on her own power for its greatness. A Daimon that  
would <br>be able to crush the Senshi.

><br>Most importantly... it was a Daimon that could operate without  
her.

>When the Senshi arrived - and they would eventually - she would be  
long <br>gone with the Crystals. Then, under the cover of her other  
plants, her

>killer could strike. The Senshi would be nothing more than a memory  
in <br>less than a day.

><br>Throwing back her head and laughing loudly, Tellu closed and  
sealed the

>front doors. Ignoring the sounds of some late comers banging on the  
<br>outside, Tellu turned back to the people filling her beloved  
garden.

>Now was the time. Now was the moment of her greatest triumph. With a  
<br>sweep of her hand, the plants transformed.

><br>All around the room, beautiful flowering plants writhed and  
sprouted

>tentacles. Vines and creepers leaped from the trestles and engulfed  
<br>their victims. All around, beauty turned to beast. Flora leapt  
and

>lurched in a most unnatural fashion. Standing in the middle of the  
<br>warehouse, Tellu held aloft the massive crystal she was using to

>collect the Heart Crystals from people. <br>

>All around her, people fell to the floor as the physical embodiment  
of <br>their souls were ripped away. In less than two minutes, none  
were left

>standing, and Tellu reigned supreme. Victory was hers!<br>

>Less than an hour earlier, an innocent looking pair of girls were  
<br>trying to get their friend organised. For the third time in a  
row, they

>had managed to get fifty meters down the street from their companion's <br>house, only to have her realise that she had forgotten something of  
>vital importance. Back inside she would run, making them another five <br>minutes late.  
><br>Finally Usagi was ready. It had taken a mammoth effort to get her  
>organised, but Setsuna's steady reassurance, and Chibi-Usa's whining <br>eventually convinced the blonde that she had every thing she needed.  
>Although she did not spend a lot of time with the Guardian of Time, <br>Meiou Setsuna was one of Chibi-Usa's few friends. The older woman was  
>acquainted with her from the future, and Chibi-Usa had decided it was <br>time for the three of them to spend some quality time together. Most  
>importantly, it would be a chance for Chibi-Usa to see some really <br>pretty plants that she had seen an advertisement for.  
><br>The three girls ran along the street, desperately trying to make up for  
>lost time. Puffing and panting, they eventually arrived at the <br>warehouse where the botany display was on. Unfortunately, they also  
>managed to arrive just a few minutes late. As they had been running <br>down the last stretch, they had seen the doors close. Banging their  
>fists against the doors, the girls struggled to get in but to no avail. <br>  
>Chibi-Usa gave Usagi a scowl. "I really wanted to see that! 'Special <br>Display!', 'One Day Only!' and I missed it."  
><br>Setsuna nodded. "It would have been quite impressive. I expect that it  
>was a special display from Tokyo's Botanical Gardens. Don't worry, <br>Chibi-Usa, I'm sure that we will be able to see it again some day."  
><br>"Ohhhh, and it's all my fault. If I was ready quicker, we would have  
>been able to see it. Ohhhh, I'm sorry guys. I didn't mean to."<br>  
>"It's all right, Usagi-chan. Puu says that we can see it some other <br>time. She's always right." Setsuna looked down at the little girl. She  
>did not want to disillusion Chibi-Usa and say that she did not know for <br>sure. Perhaps she could find a notice that said where it was occurring.  
>Stepping away from Usagi and her daughter, she let them make plans what <br>to do instead for the rest of the afternoon.  
><br>Setsuna looked back from the front door of the warehouse. "You know,  
>it's really strange. I can't find any information here about who's <br>actually presenting it. I was hoping that---"  
><br>Going silent for a moment, Setsuna gasped and set her features sternly.  
>Screams! Screams of terror and pain! Looking back to her friends, they <br>all nodded in unison, they had heard them too. Chibi-Usa stepped  
>forward with determination. "The Witches 5! It was a trap! Quick, this <br>looks like a job for... the Sailor Senshi!"  
><br>Sprinting around the corner of the building, each of the girls drew



>forth her henshin stick and recounted her words of power. With a  
<br>dazzling display of pyrotechnics, the three sailor suited  
defenders of  
>love and justice. Striking a pose, the girls prepared themselves for  
<br>battle. Today they would again fight the forces of evil, and once  
  
>again, the fate of the world rested on their shoulders. The duties  
of a <br>magical girl defender were arduous, but none of them would  
ever  
>consider relinquishing their tasks for the simple life. Too many  
people <br>depended on them to allow that luxury.  
><br>Sailor Chibi Moon gave a smile. Too often she was left on the  
  
>sidelines. Too often she had to wait while others did the fighting.  
<br>This was her chance to get to do some real good for the world and  
to  
>fight evil!<br>  
>When her leader turned back to the front of the building, Sailor  
Pluto <br>placed a gloved hand on her arm. "Wait, Sailor Moon! That's  
just what  
>they'll be expecting. Come on, there's got to be a back way in."<br>  
  
>Nodding once, Sailor Moon followed her compatriots. Shortly, they  
found <br>a small, unlocked wooden door. Sailor Pluto was right: they  
could use  
>this and get the drop on their enemy. For once, they would have the  
<br>advantage of surprise. Hopefully, that would make up the  
difference in  
>their numbers, because it would take a while for the rest of the  
Senshi <br>to arrive, even though the call had already gone out.  
  
><br>Inside the warehouse was a scene from a gardener's nightmare.  
Plants  
>writhed and thrashed on the floor, their whip like tendrils flailing  
<br>around, seeking more victims. The whole place seemed to be alive  
with  
>them, the only quiet spot was the small area in the centre of the  
floor <br>that a woman stood.  
><br>She was obviously one of the Witches 5, because as they watched,  
  
>several Heart Crystals floated from the people captured by the  
plants <br>into a large crystal that she held in her hands. The  
woman's insane  
>laughter echoed around the walls of the warehouse, showing that here  
<br>was someone who really enjoyed their work.  
><br>"Plants are there to be appreciated by everyone. They are  
objects of  
>beauty for everyone to enjoy, and you have perverted them to your  
own <br>ends! I am Sailor Moon, and in the place of the Moon, I shall  
punish  
>you!"<br>  
>Tellu looked up to the balcony where the battle cry had come from.  
It <br>was the Sailor Senshi, here to try and ruin her plans. But  
they were  
>too late. Too late and too weak! The instant that Sailor Moon comes  
<br>down to try and rescue these pitiful people, she would strike,  
  
>unleashing her attack plants.<br>  
>Sailor Moon did descend. Accompanied by her allies - one taller and  
one <br>shorter - she landed and looked at all of the plants that

were now

>starting to attack them. "Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea!"<br>

>While Sailor Moon tried to fight back the even encroaching mass of  
<br>tendrils, Sailor Pluto and Sailor Chibi Moon went into action.  
Bright

>globes destroyed the attacking vines by irresistibly intense levels  
of <br>the colour pink as Sailor Pluto used the Dead Scream to keep  
them at

>bay. On the right, Sailor Chibi Moon was crowing in triumph; not  
once, <br>but twice her attack had worked! She was a real Sailor now,  
able to

>fight with the best of them.<br>

>Sailor Chibi Moon had just turned her head to boast to Sailor Moon  
when <br>a tendril slipped past her defences and wrapped itself  
around her

>waist. "Eeeek! Pink Sugar Heart Attack!" Levelling the little wand  
at <br>the tendril, small pink hearts came trickling out, fading  
before the

>impacted.<br>

>"No! No, not now! Pick Sugar Heart Attack!" Again the attack failed,  
<br>and she could feel herself being pulled off her feet. Through the

>tangle of moving vines, she could see something larger. Something  
big, <br>mean, and very scary looking. Now would probably be a really  
bad time

>to get taken in!<br>

>"SAILOR MOON.... HEEELLLLLLLP!"<br>

>Knocking away the vine that was reaching for her, Sailor Moon saw  
her <br>daughter caught by the vines. Even as she tried to move  
forward to help

>her, more tendrils came to attack her. There was no way that she  
could <br>reach Chibi Moon in time...

><br>Reaching inside herself for the power she needed, Sailor Moon  
took hold

>of the Moon Sceptre. She may not have defeated Witch Eudial, but  
this <br>time there was no way she would fail. Her daughter was in  
danger, and

>Sailor Moon would use the full power of the Silver Moon Crystal to  
save <br>her if she needed to.

><br>"MOON... SCEPTRE... ELIMINATION!"

><br>Completing her turn, Sailor Moon directed the glowing beam over  
the

>plants. Wherever the energy touched, the possessed, evil plants  
<br>shrivelled up. Working her way from one side of the room to the  
other,

>Sailor Moon systematically destroyed everything in their path. The  
only <br>thing that escaped destruction was Witch Tellu, who had  
leapt above the

>path of destruction. Freed from the confines of the attacking  
tentacle, <br>Sailor Chibi Moon fell backwards, running to hold onto  
her friend

>Sailor Pluto.<br>

>Lowering the Moon Sceptre, Sailor Moon sighed. Winning was so hard,  
but <br>it had been worth it. Again Sailor Moon saves the day... Then  
she saw

>the Witch's smile and her blood ran cold.<br>

>"You destroyed my beautiful plant's Sailor Moon, and for that I  
shall <br>kill you. Come forth, my Ultimate Plant. Come forth and  
fulfil your

>destiny: destroy Sailor Moon!"<br>  
>From deep within the burnt brown remains piled on the floor,  
something <br>stirred. In moments, what had seemed like a mountain of  
dead vegetation  
>had erupted into a screaming and whirling mass. Bigger than any of  
the <br>previous plants, it ripped up the flooring exposing thick  
roots; roots  
>that began to move and drag the plant closer to the people it wanted  
to <br>make into dinner.  
><br>Furrowing her brows, Sailor Moon tightened her grip on the Moon  
  
>Sceptre. 'Just a Daimon,' she told herself. 'Just a Daimon.' Never  
<br>before had she been defeated by a single Daimon, and this time  
she  
>would win again!<br>  
>"MOON SCEPTRE ELIMINATION!"<br>  
>Once again the cleansing energy speared outwards from the Moon  
Sceptre. <br>However, this time it was met by an equal power. Washing  
over the demon  
>plant, the energy sprayed off it harmlessly in a fireworks display  
that <br>made New Year's celebrations seem tame. Even though she  
gritted her  
>teeth and poured everything she had into it, the plant resisted. It  
was <br>not coming forward, but it was not retreating either.  
  
><br>Eventually the strain was too much, and Sailor Moon sagged to  
her  
>knees, leaning on the Moon Sceptre for support. 'Too much. It was  
too <br>much. There was no way I can beat that plant.' The sound of  
Tellu's  
>laugh brought her head up, but even that was an effort.<br>  
>"Ha! Sailor Moon, you are defeated. I have collected all the Heart  
<br>Crystals from these people. Now my plant is after you. Yours are  
the  
>only ones left! Soon you shall be defeated by my plant, because it  
has <br>all my power too, and you could never defeat me!"  
  
><br>Although she felt like weeping, Sailor Moon lurched to her feet  
when  
>she felt Sailor Pluto's hands under her arms. "Come on Sailor Moon,  
<br>help will be here soon!"  
><br>Even as she spoke, one of the dextrous vines rippled through the  
space  
>where they stood, knocking the two women flying. Lying on her side,  
<br>Sailor Moon stared back at where her doom was approaching. Then  
she saw  
>it, a movement in the rafters. Only one person would be there at  
this <br>time! The vibrant red rose that rocketed from the darkness  
only  
>confirmed her suspicions.<br>  
>With a sound like a hundred breaking windows, the rose shattered  
<br>Tellu's collection crystal. Freed from their constraints, dozens  
of  
>stolen Heart Crystals fell onto the floor, spilling around Tellu's  
<br>feet. "Sailor Moon, always remember that you are the heart of the  
  
>people. While freedom exists, you will never be defeated."<br>  
  
>Tellu looked around in stricken horror. All that work! All her  
effort <br>to collect Heart Crystals! Well, Sailor Moon would still

die, but she

>needed to get these Heart Crystals back to Mistress 9. Dropping to her <br>hands and knees, Tellu began gathering the Crystals and piling them in

>her arms. Victory was still hers!<br>

>With her head down, Tellu never saw her ultimate plant stiffen for a <br>second as though caught in indecision. Several tentacles flailed

>aimlessly for a few moments, then it lurched back where it came.

Heart <br>Crystals, that was what it craved, and it had found a huge supply.

>Heart Crystals, all guarded by this one woman...<br>

>Tellu gasped in pain when vines like steel cable wrapped around her <br>throat and waist, lifting her off the floor. This was not supposed to

>happen! Her plan was fool proof! No plant of her creation would ever <br>stop her! Even if it meant that Sailor Moon would live for another day,

>Tellu swore that she would destroy this treacherous plant and complete <br>her mission to gain the Heart Crystals.

><br>Bringing her hands together despite the pain, Tellu fired a bolt of

>power into the heart of the plant. Tendrils caught alight and fell to <br>the ground burning, but still more came. No matter how many she

>destroyed, they still came at her. Their rough edges caught her skin, <br>cutting her, draining her strength. In the midst of a field of Heart

>Crystals, Witch and Daimon battled for supremacy.<br>

>Watching from the sidelines, Sailors Moon, Pluto and Chibi Moon <br>marvelled at what they saw. This plant had twice taken Sailor Moon's

>most powerful attack, and it was still slowly winning against the <br>Witch. Or was it winning? Every moment that passed, the possibility of

>victory for either Witch or Daimon seemed to fade. The plant was slowly <br>being destroyed, and the Witch weakened with each passing second.

><br>The battle continued for almost two minutes before both of them

>collapsed, apparently dead. Tuxedo Kamen walked forward and poked the <br>corpses both with his cane. They were dead. By linking her own energy

>to the Daimon, Tellu had guaranteed that it was the one enemy she could <br>never defeat without losing herself. Quietly, Tuxedo Kamen shuddered

>at the thought of what would have happened to his precious Sailor Moon <br>if he had not chanced to strike at Tellu's one weak point when he did.

><br>In short order, Tuxedo Kamen was joined by the three Senshi already

>there. As they were returning the Crystals to their owners the other <br>Senshi arrived. They were too late for the battle, but their help was

>always welcome. Especially welcome since Sailor Moon was so exhausted <br>from her attacks that she could hardly stand.

><br>As people began to recover consciousness, the Senshi made good their

>escape. Spending too long in one place was a good way to let the world <br>know too much about them. Once out of sight, all the girls

transformed.

>Chibi-Usa stood next to her mother, looking up at the older girl with <br>respect in her eyes. Unfortunately, Usagi was too tired to notice it.

>All she did notice was the warm way Mamoru had his arm around her and <br>was supporting her. His warmth went a long way to restoring her spirits

>and her strength.<br>

>After appropriate congratulations - and a few recriminations about <br>Sailor Moon taking on the Witches single-handedly - they dispersed back

>to their other tasks. There was a lot that they could learn from this <br>battle, but Sailor Moon was too tired to talk now. Booking a Senshi

>meeting at Rei's temple for the following day, the friends waved <br>goodbye and went their separate ways.

><br>Several blocks from where they parted company, Rei was beginning to

>feel she was being followed. Placing a hand into her pocket, she took <br>firm hold of her henshin stick and looked around. No-one. The street

>seemed to be empty of people. It was not until she looked low to the <br>ground that she discovered the small white cat that was walking along

>fifteen meters behind her.<br>

>Stopping where she was, Rei contemplated the small furry face.

Normally <br>Artemis was a happy cat, smiling or joking. It seemed he was only

>serious when Minako or Usagi were in trouble - which did seem to happen <br>all too often. Now he looked like he was frowning; deep in thought as

>though worrying about the weighty questions of existence. Or... Or <br>perhaps he was worrying about Minako...

><br>"Artemis? Are you OK? Is Mina-chan OK?"

><br>He looked up at her with a distracted air. "Mina-chan... Yes. Yes,

>\_she's\_ OK."<br>

>Rei relaxed and took her hand out of her pocket. Crisis averted. If <br>there really was something wrong, she knew she could count on Artemis

>to tell her. She liked the cat, he sometimes seemed to take things too <br>lightly, but he cared for her friends' well being and that was what

>mattered. Even though he seemed like a softy, there was iron in the <br>core of his soul, and he had a dedication as strong as any of the

>Senshi. He was a cat you could depend on in trouble.<br>

>"Rei-chan?"<br>

>"Are you coming back to the shrine with me? You didn't have another <br>fight with Luna, did you?"

><br>It's hard to believe that a cat can blush, but Artemis' face turned a

>lively shade of red. "No! Not at all. Actually, Rei-chan, I needed to <br>speak to you about something."

><br>She barely managed to make out the last few words. Whatever subject was

>upsetting him, he must have felt really strongly about it. So strongly <br>it made him nervous, rather than his normal go-get-'em attitude. Rei

>walked in silence. Whatever it was, he would tell her in his own good <br>time.  
><br>"Rei-chan, I need to ask you some questions about Saturn Knight."  
>Watching the way her mouth firmed into a thin line, he hurried on. "I'm <br>not going to say anything bad about him. I... I just want what's best  
>for you... For both of you."<br>  
>Rei looked at him in askance. "You've been talking to Setsuna-san <br>again, haven't you? She's never got anything good to say about him."  
><br>"No, honestly, I haven't. I'll admit, I didn't like Saturn Knight in  
>the Moon Kingdom. I'll even admit that having him here scared me at <br>first. But now... Now I... Now I don't really mind the fellow. All  
>right, I never really speak to him, but he treats you so well. It's <br>almost like he's a different man from the one I knew. He seems almost  
>at peace, as though all his troubles have been put to rest."<br>  
  
>"So you're not going to try and talk me out of seeing him? He actually <br>asked me out to breakfast yesterday. Just us, not the Senshi, not at  
>some Daimon attack. Isn't it too romantic?"<br>  
>Artemis looked down at the ground and cursed under his breath. This was <br>going to be so hard. "I know you like him Rei-chan, and I think he  
>likes you, and that's why I need to talk to you. I also know that you <br>haven't had a boyfriend since Mamoru."  
><br>Rei nodded. She had covered it up under a happy smile, but loosing  
>Mamoru to Usagi had really hurt. She had tried to tell herself it was <br>just a silly high school crush, but it had seemed like so much more  
>than that. To find that the man you were head-over-heels in love with <br>was destined for someone else... Well, Artemis was right, she hadn't  
>had a boyfriend since then. Ranma did not really count. Perhaps Saturn <br>Knight was the man she needed to help bring her into bloom again.  
><br>"Do you know why Sailor Pluto has tried to discourage you from seeing  
>Saturn Knight?"<br>  
>"Humph. She thinks he's a bad influence. She just remembers what he was <br>like before. Being born again has changed him. I know it has! He's nice  
>now. He... He doesn't do all those terrible things that she talks <br>about."  
><br>"And do you know why she hasn't succeeded in breaking up the two of  
>you?"<br>  
>"Because... Because I think I love him, and she could never break <br>that."  
><br>Artemis sighed and stopped walking. Looking down at his paws he sighed  
>again. He was the only one that seemed to see it. Or maybe he was the <br>only one that cared enough about Rei and Saturn Knight to do something.  
>When tears began to blur his vision, he realised just how hard this

<br>would be for both him and Rei. He was almost ready to continue when he  
>felt strong hands pick him up and gently nestle him the crook of her  
<br>elbow.  
><br>"Hey, it's OK, Artemis. You can tell me. Is there some other reason  
>that she wants to break us up?"<br>  
>Wiping his tears away, Artemis looked up at his friend. Being an  
<br>advisor and guardian of the Senshi was so much more than helping with  
>battle plans. "What do you know about Sailor Saturn?"<br>  
>"Not much. She's the last Senshi to awaken. I think Pluto said that she  
<br>would only awaken when the world was in dire trouble and we really  
>needed her. I'm pretty sure she supposed to be the strongest Senshi,  
<br>but I can't remember if she's stronger than Sailor Moon."

><br>"That's about right. In some ways she was stronger than Sailor Moon, or  
>Queen Serenity even. In all other ways she was much weaker. But she was  
<br>a very dangerous girl. A very troubled girl too. Long ago in the Moon  
>Kingdom, everyone was scared of Sailor Saturn. <br>"It was nothing that she did, Sailor Saturn was always a perfect little  
>angel. It was just who she was. She was too powerful and dangerous, it  
<br>made people nervous. Like you said, she also only appeared when the  
>Kingdom was in great danger. Some people thought that if she was not  
<br>around, the danger would go away too.  
>"The reason that Sailor Pluto has not made stronger efforts to break up  
<br>the two of you is she is worried about Sailor Saturn."

><br>"What? Why is she worried about her? She hasn't even awoken yet."  
><br>"True. But you know how Pluto is. Leave no stone unturned. She thinks  
>that Saturn Knight is a bad influence. I guess she's just worried that  
<br>if you broke up with him, he might get together with Sailor Saturn."  
><br>Something cold and hard seemed to form in the bottom of Rei's stomach.  
>She knew she did not want to ask this question, but something seemed to  
<br>force her lips to speak. "Why does she think that?"

><br>Artemis looked away from her. Being in Rei's arms no longer seemed  
>quite so comforting. "Do you remember when we were all talking about  
<br>Saturn Knight that first time? Can you remember why he's called that?"  
><br>"Sure," she said, sounding puzzled. "Because he's part of the royal  
>family on Saturn. Like Mamoru was Earth Knight until he was engaged to  
<br>Usagi... or Princess Serenity or whatever."

><br>"That's...not quite... right."  
><br>"What do you mean? What else could it be, unless..." The cold, hard  
>ball in her stomach seemed to settle even lower with a sudden shift.  
<br>  
>"Yes. Saturn Knight... was Sailor Saturn's husband."<br>

>Silence.<br>  
>Silence aside from the sound of a white cat landing on the pavement.  
<br>The hands that had held him had gone slack, and Rei had stopped

>walking. She just stood there; her mouth was working slowly, but no  
<br>words came out.

><br>Eventually she spoke. It was deathly quiet and in a whisper.

"Why...

>Why didn't anyone tell me?"<br>

>"We thought you knew. We... I didn't realise until now how serious  
you <br>were. I..."

><br>"Please. Just... leave me alone for a while."

><br>Artemis was standing there with one paw raised, ready to follow  
her as

>she ran down the street. It would have been easy to follow her, she  
<br>left a trail of small wet spots on the road where her tears had  
fallen.

>Slowly Artemis turned and walked back to Minako's house. <br>

>From his nose to his tail, he wished he had not been the one to tell  
<br>Rei. It broke him up inside to have to do that to her. But... But  
what

>would have happened when Sailor Saturn finally awoke? Given further  
<br>time, Rei would have fallen further and further into love, to  
lose her

>man to an uncaring destiny for a second time may have been too much  
to <br>bear. Inside, Artemis had no doubts that Sailor Saturn and her  
Knight

>would be reunited some day, despite all of Pluto's plots. To love  
<br>someone so much that she was able to send his soul forward in  
time so

>they could be together... was there anything that could keep  
apart?<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>Thursday morning, 5:18am. Nothing short of a demon from the pits of  
<br>hell could rouse the sailor-suited defender of love and justice,  
Sailor

>Moon, from her bed at this time of the morning. Unfortunately, she  
was <br>awake. Unfortunate for her, unfortunate for the people the  
demon had

>attacked, and unfortunate for the demon. It had definitely chosen  
the <br>wrong time to visit the mortal plane.

><br>Ringed around the demon, the girls leaped and struck, firing  
their

>magical energies into their foe with determination. At least, most  
of <br>them did. Notably, Sailor Mars was there in body, but not in  
spirit.

>This morning she held to the rear, only firing the occasional attack  
at <br>the demon. Even those attacks she did launch were her earlier  
and

>weaker attack: the Mars Fire Soul. <br>

>Beyond that, Sailor Mars kept sending dark glares at anyone that  
<br>approached her, especially Sailors Moon and Jupiter. After Sailor

>Mercury hid the girls from the demon's view with her Bubble Blast,  
she <br>decided it was time for her to try and rectify the situation.  
Normally

>it would be Sailor Moon's infectious good nature that overcame these  
<br>sorts of problems, but today she could not get close before Mars



would

>stomp off and pretend to be interested in attacking the demon.<br>

>"Mars, what's the matter? You seem... I don't know, upset about  
<br>something I guess."

><br>Mars turned away, but not fast enough that Sailor Mercury could not see

>the dark bags under her eyes. Eyes that were red and bloodshot from  
<br>crying. Before the girl could retreat away from her too, Mercury put an

>arm around her shoulder and led her from the battle. Sailor Moon could  
<br>take care of the demon; the other Senshi had weakened it enough. Now it

>was time for Mercury to try and help her team mate. <br>

>"Mercury... Do you think he knew? All this time? Do you think he knew  
<br>anyway?"

><br>Raising her eyes to where Sailor Mars looked, Mercury could see the

>tall figure of a man in the shadows. Although his features could not be  
<br>seen in the darkness, the absence of a top hat informed her that this

>was Saturn Knight and not Tuxedo Mask. "Know what, Mars?"<br>

>She sniffled and wiped an errant tear from her face. "Known that we  
<br>could never be together. Known about Sailor Saturn. Known about his

>destiny, perhaps. I don't know, Mercury. It just seems so hard some  
<br>times. First it was Mamoru, now it's Saturn Knight. Is it something

>about me? Is it so wrong for me to have a man to love?"<br>

>"What are you talking about? Saturn Knight is here for you! He's not  
<br>here to watch us fight. Why would you think that... Oh, no... Sailor

>Saturn... You don't think that?..."<br>

>Mars nodded. "Artemis told me last night on the way back to the shrine.  
<br>He's Sailor Saturn's husband. She was the one that sent him through

>time. I know she's not awake yet, but when she is... is there any way  
<br>that I can compete against her? It's the same as what happened with

>Mamoru all over again. I finally met a man I really like and he gets  
<br>taken away from me. It's not even as though it's anything I did. It's

>just destiny."<br>

>"Oh, Mars. I'm so sorry. I never even thought..."<br>

>Mars nodded. Bracing herself as the demon disintegrated into dust in  
<br>the background, Mars let her friend's supporting arm slid from her

>shoulder. Deep down she knew that Saturn Knight couldn't know about  
<br>Sailor Saturn yet. She knew that he was a kind person inside. He would

>never do something like this to hurt her. The thought that she would be  
<br>the one who would need break up with him drove a dagger of ice into her

>already broken heart. <br>

>Taking the first step to the most horrible thing she had ever needed to  
<br>do, Sailor Mars tried to hold back the tears that fought for release.

>For him, she would be strong. For him. It would not be the last time  
<br>they met, but it would be the last time that they met as

potential

>lovers. For him, she would hold herself together. He deserved the truth <br>from someone who cared. Later, when she was alone again, she could cry

>them both.<br>

>She watched her - no, not hers anymore - man jump to the ground. He <br>still held the Silence Glaive in his hand. Before it had always seemed

>a symbol of his power and self assurance. A warrior and his weapon, <br>both confident in the strength of his suitor that he would leave them

>battle unaided. She could see by the way that he walked and the <br>cautious steps he took that he knew something was wrong. Those

>perceptive blue eyes of his must be taking in every moment of her <br>despairing approach.

><br>Offering her a cardboard box with one hand, he held the other out to

>take her small, fragile seeming fingers. He was always a gentleman, <br>always so proper in the way he approached her. It was almost as though

>he was as scared of losing her as she was of losing him. She stopped <br>three feet from him, and only just managed to stop her hand from

>reaching out to take his. It was had become a habit to hold hands and <br>walk for a short while. Nothing more, just friends walking together and

>holding hands.<br>

>A sob escaped her throat and Sailor Mars turned her head so she could <br>wipe more moisture from her face. When Saturn Knight took an

>instinctive step forward to comfort her, Sailor Mars retreated a step, <br>staying just out of reach. The way he stopped short and looked at the

>offending hand, she may as well slapped him or stabbed him with a <br>dagger. Confusion reigned on his face.

><br>Before he could speak, she held up a hand and sniffled once. Saying it

>without his caring words would be hard enough. If he so much as spoke <br>and offered her any support, Mars knew her resolve would break down;

>Sailor Saturn could be damned and so could destiny. This man would be <br>hers. Her struggle ended in success because he held his silence. For

>long moments, they stood there, until slowly she raised her head and <br>looked up at him through her thick black bangs.

><br>"I... I can't..." Gods, this was killing her. "I can't... see you...

>any more."<br>

>"Wh... Wh...Why? What did I do?..."<br>

>"It's not you. It could never be you. It's nothing you did. It's... <br>There's someone else..." Mars choked on her words and placed her hands

>over her face. "It's Sailor Saturn. The two of you are destined to be <br>together... There's no place for me... I can't..."

><br>By the time the sounds of his footsteps registered on her

>consciousness, he was already long gone. Gone; while she spoke. Gone; <br>as she had rejected him. Gone; before she had even half finished

>explaining. All that remained was the small cardboard box he had  
<br>brought her. Bending down she picked it up and tentatively looked  
>inside. A table for two at a high class restaurant. And a  
calligraphy <br>note inviting her to meet him there... without their  
masks.  
><br>As Sailor Mars sunk to her knees, the gentle brush strokes on  
the  
>invitation dissolved in the moisture of her tears.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Saturn Knight ran and fought down the tears which struggled to break  
<br>free. He was running, running from an enemy he could not fight.  
Running  
>from pain he could not escape. His enemy was his own heart, his own  
<br>mind. After three hundred years of being alone, Ranma had finally  
>decided to try again... and he had been rejected. Rejected for  
<br>another's attention.  
><br>'There's someone else...'  
><br>Her words still rang in his head like a death knell. The pretty  
soldier  
>Sailor Mars had someone else. Of course she did. She was a woman of  
<br>sublime beauty, powerful, self assured with a spirit of fire. How  
could  
>someone like that possibly be alone? Had he been fooling himself all  
<br>this time? Had he been leading himself on, pretending that she  
must  
>feel the same things for him that he felt for her? Had... Had she  
been <br>leading him on?  
><br>"No!"  
><br>No, his Sailor Mars would never do that. She was kind and  
caring. She  
>would never do something like that. It just made him feel all the  
worse <br>for realising that it was not - could not - be her fault.  
That meant it  
>was all his fault. He was the one that had rushed things. He was the  
<br>one that had tried to go too far. To add extra salt to his  
wounds, he  
>saw how she looked when she told him. Because of his ill considered  
<br>actions, he had caused her such pain.  
><br>Stumbling to a halt in some alley... somewhere... Ranma dropped  
his  
>costume then fell against the wall in pain. It was bad enough that  
he <br>had deluded himself, not to mention forcing his obviously  
unwanted  
>attentions on Sailor Mars. Now he had hurt her so badly when he  
forced <br>her to open his eyes to the truth. Covering his face in  
shame, Ranma  
>clawed at his forehead. How could he have been so blind? How could  
he <br>have missed the fact that she did not have feelings for him?  
Was  
>Cologne-chan right? Had he really been by himself for so long that  
it <br>was impairing his judgement?  
><br>Stumbling through the alley, Ranma moaned in anguish. She was  
one of a  
>kind. No-one else in the world was like her. No-one could ever  
replace <br>Akane in his heart, but he had dared to hope that Sailor  
Mars might  
>find room to live in his heart too. Two women, each so perfect, was  
it <br>so wrong to love them both? Akane with the strength and grace

of the  
>tiger, Sailor Mars with the delicate beauty of a flickering flame.  
<br>  
>Pain and anger welled in Ranma's soul. All he really wanted to do  
was <br>fight back. Revenge himself against a world that hated him  
with  
>vigorous strength. But he couldn't. He could no more go back and  
hurt <br>Sailor Mars that cut his own arm off. Worse, because if he  
needed to  
>amputate his arm for her sake, he would have... He still would. He  
<br>could not even vent his anger in mindless destruction and  
violence.  
>With his strength... with his magic... he hated to think how many  
<br>people could be hurt by his foolish anger.  
><br>When the bucket of cold soapy water fell from a window high  
above him,  
>it was the last straw. Shrunken, wet and female, Hotaru fumed. Water  
<br>began to evaporate off her in a thick cloud of steam, and a  
sickly  
>green aura surrounded her. Was there nothing in the last three  
hundred <br>years that did not lead to heartache and failure? Was the  
nothing that  
>could give him the same simple pleasure he knew from holding Akane's  
<br>hand while walking through the falling cherry blossoms in the  
evening?  
>Was there really no hope left in the world for him?<br>  
>Running a hand through her hair she pulled it from the pony tail  
Ranma <br>wore into Hotaru's typical bob-cut. Tilting her head back,  
and looking  
>into the sky, Hotaru stared between the buildings. The sky was  
clear, <br>no roof and no planes; no obstacles that might get hit  
when she vented  
>her frustration. The entire alley glowed in the shifting green light  
of <br>her depression as Hotaru lifted her small hands above her  
head. In a  
>voice wracked with anguish, Hotaru whispered the words to free her  
<br>spirit, and release her hold on the frustration building inside  
her.  
><br>"Shi shi hokodan!"  
><br>It was not loud, but it was enough. A green column of power  
spewed from  
>her hands and arrowed into the sky. For kilometres around people  
could <br>see the thin green line. It appeared instantly, and minutes  
later it  
>disappeared just as suddenly. By the time anyone thought to  
investigate <br>the alley, it was deserted.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Female, but this time in clothes that fit, Hotaru walked through  
the  
>entry way of the Hikawa Shrine. Normally Ranma preferred to be male,  
<br>but just this once he was glad that he could be a girl. All he  
really  
>wanted was a sympathetic ear, someone to talk to. He knew Rei-san  
could <br>be a nice girl, and although he loved to argue with her, it  
was not  
>what he needed at the moment. <br>  
>When he saw the taller girl sitting glumly on the front steps of the  
<br>shrine, he knew he had made the right choice. If he was a guy, he  
knew  
>he would feel the need to tease her, to try and cheer them both up.

<br>Somehow he sensed that this would not quite be what she needed at the  
>moment. For that matter, a good shouting match was not what Ranma  
<br>needed either. What he needed was a friend, someone who could just be  
>there. He had considered going to see Chibi-Usa, but somehow he didn't  
<br>think that the little girl would quite understand the idea of two  
>friends just being together, she was more active, more of a 'do-er'.  
<br>Rei-san practised meditation and all that sort of thing. If she didn't  
>understand the benefits of silence, no-one would.<br>  
>Plopping herself on the step next to Rei, Hotaru cupped her chin in her  
<br>palms and subconsciously mimicked her friends posture. Both of them sat  
>there, staring ahead, not saying a word. Each lost in the thought of  
<br>someone who they would never get to know.  
><br>After some minutes, a gust of wind took some of Rei's long hair and  
>brushed it across Hotaru's face, causing her to sneeze. With a guilty  
<br>start, Rei took the offending strands and pulled them back, holding the  
>hair over her left shoulder. "Sorry about that Hotaru-chan."<br>  
  
>"Rei-san? What's wrong? You looked so sad sitting here all by  
<br>yourself."  
><br>Rei stifled a snuffle and looked away, idly stroking her hair.  
"It's  
>nothing, Hotaru-chan. Maybe you'll understand in a few years. How about  
<br>you? Anything I can do to help?"  
><br>Clenching her hands around her knees, Hotaru rested her head on her  
her  
>arms and looked sideways at Rei. She actually looked rather pretty with  
<br>the light of the setting sun behind her. Almost like Sailor Mars in  
Mars in  
>some distant fashion. "There's nothing you can do. This morning I just  
<br>found out what an idiot I've been recently. There was someone I really  
someone I really  
>liked. I thought they liked me back, I honestly did. And then.. And  
<br>then they just came out and told me that they loved someone else. Just  
Just  
>like that. Yes to the chocolates, but no to your heart."<br>  
>Rei slid across and placed an arm around the girl. "I'm sorry Hotaru-<br>  
<br>chan, you do know how I feel. I... well there is this guy I've liked  
I've liked  
>for a while. Real sweet type. I just found out that he's... well, let's  
<br>just say that he's already married."  
><br>"He's married and he was trying to be your boyfriend too? Who is he?  
he?  
>I'll rip him to shreds!"<br>  
>Rei gave a short, amused, almost tragic laugh. "I'm sure you'd try. I'm  
<br>sure you would. No... It wasn't quite like that. It was more of an  
of an  
>arranged marriage. I found out before he did and... I never thought I  
<br>cared about him that much."  
><br>Arranged marriages could be hard on everyone at the start. Ranma knew  
knew  
>all about that. "Is there anything that you can do?"<br>  
>Giving her another squeeze, Rei rested her head on Hotaru's small  
<br>shoulder. "No. Nothing at all. It's just... fate. He's just

someone who

>I cannot have. Of all the men I could have chosen, I seem to choose the ones who are destined for someone else... and there is never anything I

>can do."<br>

>"Sometimes the whole world seems to be against you. Only a few days ago Takuhi was killed and Cologne-chan was in hospital, now it's our lives

>falling apart. Does it get any better, Rei-san? Or does it just keep going like this for eternity?"

><br>"No. No, it gets better. You have to believe in that. I believe in the

>future. I believe that there is a bright future, where everything is clean and nice, and peace and love rule. I don't know when it's going

>to happen, but if we all work at it, I know it will happen some day. Some day, Hotaru-chan. Some day."

><br>"I'll be there, Rei-san. I don't know when it is, but I'll be there.

>I'll remember what you said today, and I'll remember how young you looked."

><br>Rei put on a mock stern face. "What? Are you saying you're still going

>to be a young little cutie when I'm all old and ugly? Humph! I'll have you know that I have it on the best authority that I'll still look this

>good in thousands of years!"<br>

>"Suuure. I'm almost tempted just to stay a little girl for that whole time just to rub it in when you get old and wrinkly!"

><br>"Me?! Wrinkly?! Eww! No!"

><br>Both girls laughed for a while, momentarily forgetting their troubles.

>"I knew I could count on you to make everything better Rei-san."<br>

>"Well, not quite everything... We don't have any ice-cream."<br>

>Hotaru pulled a man's wallet from her pocket as she stood up.

"Ranma's turn to pay! All we can eat!"

><br>Jumping to her feet, Rei chased after the suddenly active little girl.

>"Hey! You can't do that to him!"<br>

>Two voices continued to laugh down the street, echoing between the buildings.

>"Come get me!"<br>"Give me that wallet!"

>"It's in a good cause!"<br>"Hey, stop running away!"

>"Only a few more blocks!"<br>"Oh, no. I've forgotten my shoes!"

><br>\* \* \*

><br>Ami looked around that the girls assembled across her floor and sighed.

>"Tell me again why you had to meet here?"<br>

>"Neutral ground. No can discuss Husband where he hear. Why you here?"<br>

>"This is my house!"<br>

>"That good. Shampoo no want more... obstacles..."<br>

>Ami looked at the Chinese model with the long purple hair who was playing with her knife in a most disturbing manner. "Gulp! I think I'll

>go make some tea now."<br>

>Shampoo looked around the room at the other girls assembled there. Here <br>was almost everyone that knew anything about her husband. Over the last <br>couple of days they had all been contacted, and had all agreed to share <br>their meagre information. It seemed that Ranma had been hiding things <br>about himself from all of them, so it was about time that they got <br>together and aired all his dirty laundry and unearthed his hidden <br>secrets.<br>All for his own good of course.<br>So here they were, fiancees and suitors alike, anyone that had a good <br>chance of knowing about Ranma. Shampoo, Ukyo, Makoto and - maybe - Rei <br>made up the list of suitors. On the other hand, they also had Setsuna <br>and Chibi-Usa since they knew his sister. Ami rounded out the <br>compliment since she was the supplier of the "neutral ground" for the <br>meeting. All weapons were to be checked at the door; or Ami's bedroom <br>in Shampoo's case because there was not enough room in the front hall <br>for all her weapons. <br>"Where Little Sister?" <br>Ukyo shrugged. "She might know him better than anyone else, but I get <br>the feeling that she tells Ranma basically everything. I figured it <br>would be better if we tried to do without her. Anyway, she wouldn't <br>tell us what Ranma's curse was before, so she probably won't tell us <br>now. How about you? Where's the old ghoul?" <br>"Great Grandmother no want come. Great Grandmother already know <br>everything about Husband. Great Grandmother say cannot gossip about <br>friend." <br>Rei nodded and looked at Setsuna. "I don't suppose that there's much <br>you'd be allowed to tell us either?"<br>The older woman gave her a gentle smile, as though trying to say 'It's <br>not easy knowing everything.' All she said was enough for most of them <br>to discount her as an active participant in the evening's discussion. <br>"It would not be... appropriate for me to reveal all that I know about <br>the young gentleman. I can contribute some information on his sister... <br>but I would not recommend that you rely on me to answer your <br>questions."<br>Moving to a whiteboard that they had placed on one side of the room, <br>Makoto wrote the word 'Age' neatly. "All right... Anyone know how old <br>he is?"<br>"About twenty?"<br>"Do you actually know?"<br>Before Rei could reply, Ukyo waved her hand. "He's older than that. He <br>would have been twenty about three or four years ago. I used to train <br>with him before school."<br>Makoto wrote a tentative twenty-five on the board. "Anyone know where <br>he lives?" <br>Silence.

><br>"Oookay. We know anything else about him?"  
><br>"Ranma dead wife called Akane."  
><br>"He's really good at martial arts."  
><br>"He's cursed, but I don't know what it is."  
><br>"He travelled a lot when he was young."  
><br>"His sister was adopted for a while."  
><br>Makoto grabbed that one. "Good one, Ukyo-san. Maybe we can figure out  
>how old he is from his sister's age. Chibi-Usa, you know Hotaru-chan. <br>How old is she?"  
><br>"I'm sorry, I've never asked her. She's in my year, so I guess she's  
>about twelve."<br>  
>Ukyo rounded on the small girl immediately. "She WHAT?! She can't be  
<br>going to school with you! We went to school together for three years!"  
><br>"What's wrong with it? She probably just transferred schools and kept  
>going." Chibi-Usa felt a little intimidated by the big girl, even if  
<br>she didn't have her battle spatula currently.  
><br>"No, you don't understand. For three years we went to school  
  
>\_together\_. Same class. Three years ago she was my age. I knew she was  
<br>getting some sort of treatment of being small and not being able to  
>grow up properly, but I never realised it was this bad."<br>  
>"You mean her brain might not be developing either?!" You could trust  
<br>Ami to come up with something sensible, no matter how horrifying the  
>thought might be.<br>  
>Ukyo nodded reluctantly.<br>  
>"Oh, that's so sad." All the girls looked weepy for a while then  
<br>continued on their quest to dig out Ranma's secrets. That is, all of  
>them except Setsuna. She alone had seen Hotaru cast the Dragon Slave  
<br>from the safety of the Gates Of Time, of course. That sort of power and  
>palpable evil demonstrated that there was nothing wrong with her brain,  
<br>albeit her mind might be twisted and perverted by her evil ways. It was  
>times like these that Setsuna wished she had not banned herself from  
<br>investigating the chain of events leading up to the present. It would  
>be very nice to be half as confident and well informed as she acted.<br>  
>Setsuna had almost been satisfied with sheer coincidence when she  
<br>remembered what Chibi-Usa had said: 'She's in my year.'  
Chibi-Usa's  
>age. Of all the ages the girl could have picked, she just happened to  
<br>appear exactly the same age as Chibi-Usa. The same age as the time  
>travelling Moon Princess, the girl that Setsuna herself had sent back  
<br>in time. Worse still, Setsuna's future self had never revealed why she  
>had sent back Chibi-Usa. Now it seemed all too apparent.<br>  
  
>Somehow over the centuries between now and the Crystal Millennium,  
<br>Setsuna must have changed into a heartless and manipulative woman. She  
>had obviously sent Chibi-Usa back as a lure, a target so vulnerable



and <br>tempting that it would draw out their enemies. It had worked too.

>Hotaru was most definitely interested Chibi-Usa; she pretended to be <br>the princess' friend, associated with her and the Senshi and tried to

>hide her true evil power. Now it was just a question of how Setsuna <br>could save Chibi-Usa without exposing her hand and having to attack

>Hotaru directly. This would require some serious thought.<br>

>After all the excitement the girls continued to compile vital <br>statistics, everything from favourite foods to eye and hair colour. Ami

>was wandering through the room when she realised something that was <br>missing from the list. "He's rich too."

><br>Everyone turned to her. Rei could hardly keep the incredulity from her

>voice. "What on Earth do you mean 'he's rich'? He never has more than a <br>thousand yen, and his sister's just as badly off. His father has hardly

>anything other than house, and I don't think a teacher's salary would <br>qualify as rich. Besides, the only work I've ever seen Ranma do is at

>that dojo, and I know he doesn't get paid for that. He can't be rich."<br>

>"But he is! Hotaru-chan got me to help with the restoration of some <br>really old pictures. It cost almost a million yen, but it was nothing

>to her. She even gave me a credit card from Ranma with over forty <br>million yen on it. I'm telling you, he's loaded."

><br>Around the room there was silence. Makoto couldn't help but think that

>he was perfect in every way, and he was rich too. Rei felt herself <br>soften to him. She knew several rich girls at school; they often

>complained about boys who dated only because of their money. She also <br>knew several boys who liked to pretend that they were the gods' gift to

>women purely because of their money. Ranma obviously wanted to be loved <br>for himself, not his money: that was so sweet.

><br>Shampoo did not care: real warriors had no need for mere money.

><br>Staring at the list, Ami felt else something tickling at the back of

>her brain. There was something there... Something that she remembered <br>from before... "Akane!"

><br>"Akane Husband dead wife. You know when they married, Smart Girl?"

><br>Ami turned a questioning eye on the Amazon for the name but spoke

>nonetheless. "No, it's just that 'Akane' was the name of the girl in <br>Hotaru-chan's pictures. For that matter, now that I think about it, she

>looked a lot like that girl in the fire reading Rei-chan did with <br>Ranma. I wonder if there is some sort of connection?"

><br>Rei shrugged. "Could be. How old were the pictures?"

><br>"Three hundred years, according to Hotaru-chan. The people at the

>museum though that could be accurate."<br>  
>"I guess that rules out the idea that the pictures were of Ranma's  
<br>wife. Maybe they were related. Ranma knew all sorts of history  
about  
>his wife's family. I was supposed to be some sort of tradition for  
the <br>two clans to marry together or something."  
><br>"Humph. Amazon tribe better than that. Amazon know Shampoo need  
strong  
>husband from outside village, or children come out bad."<br>  
>They worked on their list for a while, but nothing conclusive seemed  
to <br>come from it. Half the details were purely speculative, the  
other half  
>were second hand information. All in all, they had managed to get  
<br>themselves more questions than answers. That frustrated all of  
them,  
>Shampoo more than most since her Great Grandmother apparently knew  
all <br>the answers but would not tell her.  
><br>The only answer they did manage to come up with was Ranma's  
money. When  
>Ranma had talked to Rei previously, he had let slip that his  
father's <br>name was Genma and he was dead, but yet Hotaru's father  
is called  
>Souichi and he was very much alive. Instant answer: Ranma was  
actually <br>adopted, and his father must have left him lots of  
money. Now they just  
>needed answer to some other questions.<br>  
>Why was Hotaru adopted when Ukyo knew her?<br>Where does Ranma live?  
  
>How old is he?<br>How does he know people in Poland and Tibet?  
  
>How long did he stay there?<br>How did he and Hotaru get Takuhi's  
spirit staff?  
>How did he develop his Ki and martial arts to such levels?<br>When  
did he meet Cologne?  
>Why does Cologne consider Ranma to be an Amazon?<br>What did Ranma  
do during the day? He just seemed to vanish.  
>When was he married to Akane, and how long?<br>How could one man eat  
so much and stay so lean?  
>What was his family style of 'Anything Goes'? No-one had ever heard  
of <br>it.  
><br>Most importantly... Whom did Ranma love?  
><br>When their meeting broke up, each of the girls silently vowed to  
  
>themselves that they would be the one to extract the information  
from <br>Ranma or Hotaru. Shampoo planned to speak to her Great  
Grandmother;  
>maybe if she tried hard enough she could convince her to reveal all.  
<br>Ukyo considered the weekend rush at the Ucchan, and decided that  
Monday  
>would be the right time to nail him for some firm answers. Setsuna  
<br>silently vowed that she would brace the Outer Senshi to prepare  
  
>themselves, who knows when Hotaru would strike?<br>  
>Makoto and Rei walked side by side as they left Ami's place. It was  
<br>getting late so they decided it was time to take Chibi-Usa home.  
  
>Naturally enough, Setsuna was with them and she kept casting worried  
<br>glances at all three girls. In her books, each of the others were  
in  
>dire trouble. Chibi-Usa was best friends with a girl who could give

<br>Lilith a run for her money as Satan's consort. Makoto and Rei were not  
>much safer: they were involved with the hell-spawn's brother.<br>

>Setsuna was so involved in cursing the much maligned Hotaru that she  
<br>failed to pay enough attention to Chibi-Usa. Before she could stop the

>little girl, she had blurted out a damaging and dangerous statement.  
<br>"Rei-chan, if you like Ranma so much, why don't you ask him out? Maybe

>he'd tell you about his curse then."<br>

>"WHAT?" The three others echoed.<br>

>"As if I would ever want to do anything with THAT boy! He is such an  
<br>insensitive jerk. All he ever does is insult me. It's not as though he

>ever says anything nice about me."<br>

>Makoto nodded. "Come on, Chibi-Usa, you've seen them together. They're  
<br>always picking on each other. When was the last time Rei-chan said a

>whole sentence to him without yelling? She's worse than she is with  
<br>Usagi-chan."

><br>"Yes, but.... But Hotaru-chan really likes her, and you know how well

>she and Ranma get on. Besides, Rei-chan likes Usagi-chan, but they  
<br>still argue."

><br>That stopped them: wisdom from the mouths of babes. Setsuna could see

>on Rei's face that she was wavering. "Please, Rei-chan. There is no  
<br>need to jump into something like this. You are obviously still

>distraught over Saturn Knight. Really, are you sure that Ranma would be  
<br>any more suitable for you?"

><br>Rei went silent. How dare she? How dare she say something like that?

>For months Setsuna had hounded her to give up on Saturn Knight. Now  
<br>that he was out of the picture, she was telling Rei that Saturn Knight

>would have been better than Ranma? Rei tossed her hair back over her  
<br>shoulder with a negligent flick of her hand and raised her head as she

>looked away from the Guardian of Time.<br>

>"Well, I guess we'll let Ranma make that decision, won't we? I'm  
<br>teaching him at the Shrine this Saturday, so I'll ask him then. If

>Ranma says no... so be it." Turning back to the taller Senshi, Rei  
<br>looked up into Setsuna's eyes and brought her face close. "But never,

>ever think that you can interfere with my personal life. Don't even  
<br>think about coming near either me or Ranma again this weekend!"

><br>Stalking away in a huff, Rei ignored the others. She could get back to

>her place without their help, and there was no way under heaven that  
<br>she would spend any more time with Setsuna tonight. In the darkness of

>the night, Makoto and Chibi-Usa watched Rei leave them, alternately  
<br>appearing and vanishing as she crossed through the pools of brightness

>from the streetlights. Of the Time Guardian there was already no sign.  
<br>She had vanished as silently as a ghost when Rei captured

their  
>attention.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Their training session on Saturday had been oddly quiet. Rei was trying <br>to work her way around to something important, and Ranma... Rei was not  
>sure what Ranma was thinking. Thinking? That was the wrong word to use <br>for someone like him. Plotting was more like it. Plotting new ways to  
>tease her, new ways to pick on her!<br>  
>"Umm, Rei-san?"<br>  
>"WHAT?!"<br>  
>Collecting herself quickly, Rei looked down at the ward she was <br>demonstrating and cringed. She had just managed to scribble Ranma's  
>name right across the middle of it as her mind wandered. As Rei felt <br>her brows draw in and her mighty lungs fill with air for a nice  
  
>relaxing shouting match, she caught herself just before words began to <br>leave her throat.  
><br>There was a good reason why Rei was so tense today: she was trying to  
>be nice to Ranma. Every time she wanted to say something to the <br>inconsiderate jerk, she swallowed it down. Must be nice to Ranma. Must  
>not hit Ranma with anything to relieve her frustration. It was really <br>hard being nice to someone this long but she needed to. Just when she  
>had thought Setsuna would have been crowing with delight at her break <br>up with Saturn Knight, the woman starts bad mouthing Ranma and Hotaru.  
><br>There was no way that anyone was going to run this priestess' love  
>life. Not Cupid, not destiny, and certainly not Setsuna. Rei knew what <br>she wanted, and today she wanted a date with Ranma. When she first met  
>him he had actually seemed quite nice - for a while. Now that she knew <br>him better she saw the side of him that he had kept hidden from Ukyo  
>and Makoto; no doubt he still wanted to be able to seduce them. His <br>brash, over confident and irritatingly defensive behaviour still didn't  
>believe the fact that he was actually quite cute.<br>  
>Looking up at Ranma and the way that he was still smirking at her, Rei <br>decided that cuteness must be his only good point. Here she had gone  
>and botched an expensive piece of scroll, and he had not said a thing, <br>just sitting there silently, somehow conveying the impression that he  
>never had to worry about that sort of thing. He would always get it <br>right the first time. How could he just sit there and think those  
  
>things about her? She'd show him...<br>  
>Calm. Must remain calm.<br>  
>"You're awfully quiet today, Ranma. Cat got your tongue?"<br>  
  
>Gods! Look at him flinch! "I... I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?"<br>  
>"Ah... no, not really, Rei-san. I just have really bad memories of c-c-<br>c... them things. The thought of one of them sticking it's

horrid furry  
>paw down my mouth and grabbing my tongue and pulling and tearing and  
<br>the blood and it's teeth and those eyes and the screaming all  
around  
>and scratching and clawing and..."<br>  
>Ranma had gone very pale and started to shake even as his words died  
<br>into mumbling. Rei reached out a hand and placed it on his  
shoulder.  
>"Ranma! Ranma, it's OK! Don't think about them. You don't have to  
<br>worry. You're perfectly safe here."  
><br>After a few moments Ranma's breathing returned to normal and he  
shook  
>himself like a dog drying off. Bracing himself he tried to look  
proud <br>and tough but Rei could see through his mask. "Aww, it's  
nothing. Just  
>a little problem I've got. Nothing at all to worry about. Hardly any  
<br>chance of anything going wrong. Hee, Hee."  
><br>Sitting back on her haunches, Rei gave him a disbelieving look.  
Did he  
>seriously want her to accept that? Then again, this was Ranma: Mr  
I'm-<br>So-Tough-I-Don't-Have-Problems. He probably did expect that  
his see-  
>through acting fooled her.<br>  
>Suddenly it dawned on her. Him, her, together, alone. No-one around,  
<br>no-one to interrupt. All she needed to do was ask him. He'd never  
get  
>the guts to ask her out, so she had to be the one to take the  
plunge. <br>Drawing in a deep breath, she met his big blue eyes then  
looked down  
>slightly. "Ranma..."<br>  
>He leaned forward, anticipating her words. It was almost a whisper.  
<br>"Yes?..."  
><br>"Nothing. Nothing at all. Let's just do that ward again."  
Coward!  
>Coward! How can you face a demon by yourself and be afraid to ask  
out a <br>stupid, inconsiderate boy? Coward!  
><br>In twenty minutes time, Rei had managed to almost complete the  
complex  
>ward when a subtle beeping caught both their attention. Rei slapped  
her <br>hand onto her watch and cringed in distress. She wouldn't see  
him again  
>until Monday. She knew the way that he liked to hang around with  
<br>Shampoo and the other girls on the weekend. If she missed her  
chance  
>now, she might never get an opportunity. But the Senshi! They needed  
<br>her. How could she get away with this? Especially since she knew  
how he  
>hated it when she chased him away. <br>  
>Then inspiration struck. Grabbing a piece of clean paper she wrote a  
<br>short note and folded it before passing it to him. "I'm really  
sorry,  
>Ranma. I forgot all about something I had to do. That was the alarm  
<br>just then. I... I have to go. There was something I wanted to say  
to  
>you all day... and I just couldn't. Could you... Could you read that  
<br>note?... Please? I've got to go, but I'll see you on Monday for  
your  
>answer."<br>  
>As Rei ran from the room, Ranma looked down at the piece of folded  
<br>paper in his hand and wondered what it was. Once again Rei had to

run

>off, but this time she had left him something. Something from her,  
<br>something that might be an explanation of why she had to keep  
leaving

>him. He was just opening the piece of paper when he felt something.  
<br>Something to stop his hands moving in an instant.

><br>Evil. Malignant, malevolent and malicious. Evil that would  
certainly

>attract the Sailor girls. For a moment he hesitated, thinking of how  
<br>Sailor Mars had rejected him. Before he had even made up his  
mind, he

>was out of the door, clothes changing into his formal suit with cape  
<br>and mask. No matter if she rejected him, he would still watch  
from the

>shadows. He would still ensure that she was safe and alive.<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>The Daimon was in a pitiful state, weakened to the point that it  
could <br>barely bash a hole in a solid concrete wall. But then, with  
a troop of

>eight Senshi pursuing and harrying it, there was little wonder it  
was <br>exhausted and wounded.

><br>Purple blood fell from its torn body in several places, and it's  
upper

>left arm was charred where the last round of Mars Fire had hit it.

<br>Apparently it was so weak now it could not even heal itself  
properly.

>This would be a flawless victory for the Senshi. Without a Witch to  
<br>guard and guide it, the Daimon had not stood a chance against  
them.

>This was even more true than usual since both the Inner and Outer  
<br>Senshi were working together on this one.

><br>Seeing the Daimon fall down to one knee as Mercury's Shine Aqua

>Illusion bombarded it, Sailor Moon drew forth the Moon Sceptre. Now  
it <br>was her turn! No more people would be terrorised by this  
horrible

>creature of evil!<br>

>A hand touched her and stopped her as she prepared to attack. Moon  
<br>looked up at the blonde Sailor Uranus. The other girl put a  
finger to

>her lips and pointed to where Sailors Pluto and Neptune were  
delaying <br>the other Senshi. "Shh. Wait for a moment."

><br>Sailor Moon blinked her big blue eyes and scratched her head  
with her

>free hand. "Wait? Wait for what?"<br>

>Uranus pointed to where the Daimon had retreated from them. In a few  
<br>more moments it would be able to reach the people cowering the

>building. "Wait for that."<br>

>"Huh?" The other Senshi seemed to be having a similar conversation,  
and <br>the Inners did not look happy.

><br>"Wait until it takes a Heart Crystal. We have it all figured  
out. We

>know that our enemy must be ready to strike. We have to find them  
and <br>defeat them now, while they are still weak."

><br>With a vigorous tug, Sailor Moon freed her arm from Sailor  
Uranus. "We

>are the Sailor Senshi. We PROTECT PEOPLE from Daimons! I don't know  
who <br>you are!"

><br>Before Sailor Moon could side-step her, Uranus stepped in front of her.  
>Even as her view was blocked by a broad chest covered by a yellow bow, <br>Moon saw the Daimon pulling the Crystal from a young boy's chest.  
>"Forget it! This is our best hope for victory! We have to trace the  
<br>Daimons to their source."  
><br>It was only a light shove to keep the persistent Sailor girl back, but  
>Moon's innate clumsiness worked against her. She could hardly believe <br>that one of her fellow pretty soldiers - even one of the Outers - would  
>actually physically restrain her. That was all it took, a light tap, a  
<br>small rock and a lack of grace: suddenly Sailor Moon was sitting on the  
>ground glaring up at the physically strongest Senshi. From where she  
<br>sat, Sailor Moon really wondered if she would be able to ever get past  
>Uranus if the girl did not decide to let her. <br>  
>Things were deteriorating just as rapidly among the other girls.  
<br>Mercury had fainted left while Venus went right. Sailor Neptune had  
>been able to block Mercury from getting past her, but Sailor Venus now  
<br>had a clear line of fire at the Daimon. Raising a hand to her lips, she  
>winked, kissed her fingers and drew forth a string of hearts. With a  
<br>flourish she drew the lengthening chain around her then threw it out at  
>the Daimon.<br>  
>"VENUS LOVE ME CHAIN!"<br>  
>No matter what the Outers thought, the end did not justify the means. <br>Now that she had this nasty Daimon all tied up, it wasn't going  
>anywhere without her permission... At least, that was true until a  
<br>vigorous blast of water sheared its way through the magical chain.  
>Bereft of the power from its owner, the glowing hearts that had bailed  
<br>up the Daimon vanished. The beast regained its feet and started down  
>the pavement.<br>  
>Even as the Senshi of love was starting her attack, her allies had the  
<br>same idea. With a nimble step to the left, Sailor Jupiter dodged around  
>Pluto and tried to sprint to the Daimon. Before she could get more than  
<br>two steps, Pluto's time staff appeared in front of her. Flicking her  
>eyes to the left she saw her leader supine on the ground. Dodge the  
<br>staff and land on Sailor Moon, or take the staff in the belly?

><br>The wind hissed out of Jupiter's lips explosively and she folded around  
>the staff. As she slipped to the ground, Jupiter looked over at Mars. <br>  
>"Go, Mars!" She tried to yell, but all that came out was a whisper.  
<br>With a good three meters between them, even Pluto would be hard pressed  
>to get to her before she fried the Daimon to extra-crispy. Almost in  
<br>slow motion, Sailor Jupiter watched as Pluto brought her staff back and  
>prepared to deal with the Senshi of fire. A voice from the distance

<br>brought everything to a sharp and sudden halt.

><br>\* \* \*

><br>Saturn Knight sat on the wall and watched as the woman he was forbidden

>to love scored another telling hit on the Daimon with her fire. That  
<br>burn wasn't healing: the Daimon must be almost dead. Flicking his eyes

>to Queen Serenity, Saturn Knight frowned.<br>

>The Queen was being accosted by one of the impostors. Hmm, the others  
<br>were too. Saturn Knight gave a grim smile. Now was the time of

>reckoning. Those other girls had skulked in the shadows for too long,  
<br>avoiding a direct confrontation with the forces of good. Now they had

>overstepped the bounds. Laying hands on royalty, letting a Daimon  
<br>escape and attack innocent bystanders; these were all things that the

>pretty Sailor girls fought against.<br>

>Pleasure at imminent justice turned to surprise and anger just as  
<br>quickly. He owed the Queen no great loyalty, but that witch had just

>beaten her to the ground and was now gloating over the top of her. He  
<br>was too far away to make out their words, but he had clearly heard it

>when Queen Serenity reprimanded Haruka and told her of the Sailors'  
<br>virtuous pursuit of protecting people. Any moment now the other Sailors

>would deal with their enemies and defeat both these witches and the  
<br>Daimon.

><br>For a long time he had wanted to go to the Queen and tell her the names

>and addresses of the witches. Before he never expected that she would  
<br>want them. The witches were careful to conceal their true nature. Now

>they had overstepped the mark. After this battle, he knew that the  
<br>overly protective Sailor Mars would want to hunt that evil witch Haruka

>to the ends of the Earth. Mars was just as protective of her Queen as  
<br>he was of Mars.

><br>He had stepped forward for a better view when the unthinkable happened.

>First the Sailor in the orange skirt had her attack destroyed by the  
<br>witch Michiru - Saturn Knight reminded himself that he should ask

>Sailor Mars what her friends names were, identifying them by skirt  
<br>colours was rather tiresome. Michiru had upped the stakes by bringing

>magic into their battle. It was obvious from the brutal way that  
<br>Setsuna had floored the real green skirted Sailor that she too was not

>averse to using force to achieve their goals.<br>

>But the way Setsuna was bringing her staff back... could it be an  
<br>attack? Was she going to fire on his Sailor Mars?! He was moving and

>shouting with actions and words he never realised he knew. Anger and  
<br>protectiveness fuelled his attack, and the eight foot weapon in his

>hand seemed to sing with happiness as he lowered the tip to fire. The  
<br>Glaive was his friend and ally, it would help him do exactly what he



>wanted. Almost as though it was made for him.<br>  
>"SILENCE GLAIVE SURPRISE..."<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Pluto heard the words and her blood went cold. She was wrong. Dead  
<br>wrong, and they would all pay the price for it. She did not know  
how he  
>had learned Sailor Saturn's devastating attack, but it would destroy  
<br>everything for blocks around. All the Senshi: dead. Sailor Moon,  
her  
>princess: dead. There was not even time for her to escape into the  
<br>safety of the time stream.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>"... REVISED: MINOR NOTE!"  
><br>A trench two meters wide and over fifteen meters deep rippled  
out from  
>the tip of the Silence Glaive. The bitumen, dirt, rocks and piping  
<br>vanished in near perfect silence. The only sound that could be  
heard  
>was a single perfect note: a middle 'C' on the most perfect flute in  
<br>existence. It was not loud, but no other sound could be heard. He  
had  
>not brought the Silence, but all that stood between the Sailors and  
<br>complete destruction was the unwavering hum of the Silence  
Glaive.  
><br>Almost in slow motion, everyone could see the trench extending.  
They  
>were transfixed by the power, unable to move as an instant passed  
like <br>an hour. By the time the trench was forty meters long and  
etching a  
>line into a building down the road, the single note ended.<br>  
  
>For a terrible moment it seemed as though the Silence had come, but  
it <br>was only a natural quiet. As his attack ended, they could  
again hear  
>the screams of people in the distance, the sounds of a water main  
<br>severed by the Minor Note, and the sounds of Saturn Knight  
yelling.  
><br>"You shall not harm Sailor Mars! You survive this time for an  
action in  
>your past! No more! When next you cross me, only one shall leave.  
Go! <br>Go, Meiou Setsuna, and never tarnish my sight again!"  
  
><br>Seven pairs of eyes flicked from Saturn Knight to Sailor Pluto.  
Flicker  
>was all they could do, because as fast as she could, the Time  
Guardian <br>vanished again. Eyes darted back to Saturn Knight, but  
he had left too.  
>Stunned to immobility, most of the Senshi could only stand  
motionless <br>and stare. He had not hurt anyone this time, but there  
was no longer  
>any question about whether he was a danger or not. <br>  
>Sailor Moon was almost going to ask Mars to explain everything when  
she <br>thought of the Daimon. Looking down the street, she expected  
to see it  
>scampering away, with her from it separated by a massive trench. She  
<br>was almost right: the remains of the Daimon were on the other  
side of  
>the trench. All that remained of the evil creature was one misshapen  
<br>arm that was rapidly dissolving to reveal a Heart Crystal held in  
its

>hand.<br>  
>Moon's eyes locked with those of Sailor Mars and they silently asked  
<br>the same questions: "Could he really be their enemy when he had  
shown  
>such delicacy with such power? Would their enemy have shown mercy to  
<br>someone they hated? Would any enemy of theirs have given a second  
  
>thought to an innocent boy's Heart Crystal?"<br>  
>In silence, the two remaining Outer Senshi left. They did not try to  
<br>justify their actions, nor did they repent them. When they had  
restored  
>the boy to health and left the area, the Inner Senshi de-transformed  
<br>and formed a tight huddle as they walked down the street. One  
thing had  
>occurred to all of them when they had time to think of it: Saturn  
<br>Knight had known Sailor Pluto's real name. If she went home, the  
Time  
>Guardian could be in serious danger.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Away from the battle, Ranma cursed himself. He should have killed  
her. <br>He knew it. He should never have spared her life, no matter  
the fact  
>that she had helped Rei when Shampoo had used the Xai Fang Gao  
Shiatsu <br>technique on her. He should have killed her then and  
ended the greatest  
>threat the world had ever faced.<br>  
>In the instant that she vanished, Ranma had felt the power of the  
Gates <br>Of Time. Lina Inverse had taught him to recognise the  
power, even  
>though she had not taught him where the Gates were. The Gates Of  
Time <br>were too great a risk for anyone to have access to them.  
Human or  
>otherwise. Anyone that knew their existence was a threat to the  
entire <br>human race, a ticking time bomb waiting to kill them all  
with one  
>foolish error.<br>  
>And he had just let her go.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Hotaru lay on her bed and looked at the ceiling. Regret was  
something <br>she had come to learn to live with. Regret that she had  
not avoided  
>Jusenkyo. Regret that she had not spent more time with Akane. Regret  
<br>for so many things on her journey. Regret that Mistress 9 never  
seemed  
>to be able to see Ranma's actions when he was Saturn Knight. Regret  
<br>that she had not saved the world from the danger of Meiou  
Setsuna.  
><br>Even if she regretted her actions, she knew she had done  
everything she  
>could. That was enough; she could fret and worry, but she would not  
be <br>able to change one thing. After the battle, Ranma had  
immediately gone  
>to Setsuna's home, hoping to find her there. It was deserted, and  
would <br>probably remain like that. Well, someday she would set  
things right.  
><br>Hotaru raised her head and looked down past her feet at the  
pictures  
>hung on the wall. "What are you looking at you tomboy?"<br>  
  
>Hotaru smiled and chuckled. She wished she could hear Akane answer

that <br>just one more time.

><br>"Who are you calling a tomboy?"

><br>Hotaru hit the roof! She didn't believe in visitations from the dead!

>It shouldn't be possible! "Oh... Oh It's just you, Rei-san. You almost <br>gave me a heart attack."

><br>Rei walked over to the bed and brushed the small girl's black hair from

>her eyes. The poor thing had gone as white as a ghost and was almost <br>shaking. "I'm sorry, Hotaru-chan. I thought you knew I was here."

><br>"That's OK. That's OK. I was just talking to my pictures... that's all.

>Say... I thought that Kaori usually stopped people from coming to visit <br>me?"

><br>Rei sat down on the edge of the bed and smiled. "Well, she might have,

>but it was your father that opened the door. He told me to come on in, <br>but I had to make sure you got your sleep. He seemed really happy. He

>even told me that in a week's time you will be cured! Isn't that <br>great?"

><br>Hotaru smiled and nodded her head. One week. That was all Mistress 9

>needed to break this rotten curse. One week and he would be a real man <br>again. Forever more.

><br>"Umm... Hotaru-chan. I was wondering... have you spoken to Ranma this

>afternoon? Since he came back from the shrine?"<br>

>"Err... Yes?"<br>

>"I don't suppose he mentioned anything about a note, did he? I asked <br>him a really important question."

><br>Damn! Hotaru cursed herself. She had forgotten all about the note that

>Rei had given him at the shrine. She must have left it in her black - <br>man sized - pants. Casting a surreptitious glance over the side of the

>bed, Hotaru checked that said pants were not visible to her guest.

That <br>could have raised some difficult questions: 'Say Hotaru, why was your

>brother undressing in your room? And is he running around naked now?'<br>

>Realising that she had been thinking too long, Hotaru tried another <br>smile. "No, he said that he had the note, but he didn't tell me

>anything about what was in it."<br>

>"I hope he's read it." Rei nervously began to pick at the cover on the <br>girl's bed.

><br>"Sure he has. You can trust Ranma, Rei-san. He's probably waiting to

>give you an answer on... On whatever it is he needs to give you the <br>answer."

><br>That seemed to relive Rei. For a few moments she sat there, twisting a

>finger into the bedspread and watching the patterns it made. Then she <br>looked up at the room's other occupant. "Hotaru-chan, if I tell you

>something, can I get you not to repeat a word of it to Ranma?"<br>

>"Ahh... That could be difficult."<br>

>"Please!"<br>  
>How could she resist those pleading eyes? "All right. I will not say  
a <br>single word about this to Ranma. If he finds out some other  
way, I  
>can't do anything about it. But I won't tell him or write it down,  
or <br>even drop any hint. Promise!"  
><br>Rei smiled and Hotaru knew it was worth juggling the facts. Just  
  
>watching a smile like that was like watching the sun come out or a  
fire <br>on a cold night. "Well, I decided to ask Ranma out on a  
date---"  
><br>"Really?!"  
><br>"Really! Well, I was wondering... If he accepts, could I get you  
to  
>help make me a dress? You did such a perfect job of it when you made  
<br>that Sailor Mars costume, I just know you must be a great  
seamstress."  
><br>'Wow. Rei-san asked me out on a date! That must be what's on the  
  
>paper.' Hotaru could hardly wait until she got a chance to read the  
<br>slip of paper Rei had given Ranma at the shrine. She might be an  
uncute  
>tomboy and all, but, hey, it would break her heart if he knocked her  
<br>back. 'Not that I would actually want to go on a date with  
Rei-san'.  
><br>"Tell you what. How about I start on the dress now anyway? I  
wouldn't  
>want to get your hopes up or anything, but you deserve a new dress,  
no <br>matter what Ranma says."  
><br>Rei blushed. It put a pale red glow on her high cheek-bones,  
  
>emphasising the fine lines of her face even more. "You... you don't  
<br>mind? I mean, I'll help as much as I can, but I'm not very good.  
I'll  
>pay for the fabric of course. Do you have a sewing machine? Mrs  
Tsukino <br>could probably lend us one if we need it."  
><br>Hotaru laughed slightly. Who needed a sewing machine when her Ki  
  
>powered arms could move so much faster and more accurately. She had  
<br>plenty of fabric sitting around, especially since she had been  
meaning  
>to make some Ranma-style shirts for her smaller girl body. With the  
<br>impending cure, Hotaru had never really gotten around to it. With  
a  
>little effort, Hotaru could have the dress made before lunch  
tomorrow.<br>  
>Giving a smile, Hotaru cast a glance over Rei. Centuries of martial  
<br>arts allowed her to accurately judge a persons reach, their  
height, leg  
>length and all their other dimensions. <br>  
>"How does red sound to you?"<br>  
>---<br>End Of Chapter.  
><br>  
><br>  
><br>

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><br>This story is dedicated to the letters F, M and J the number  
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><br>

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><br> \_\_\_\_\_

> \

> | Destiny's Child |<br> \\_\_\_\_\_ /

><br>

><br>What has gone before:

>While on a training trip with his father during the late 1600s,  
Ranma <br>fell into the spring of the drowned young girl.

Unfortunately, his

>curse can only be changed back with \_very\_ hot water, which means he  
<br>has spent most of his time in his cursed form. Not only that, but

>because the spring was drowned \_young\_ girl, he turns into a 12 year  
<br>old girl who never ages.

><br>In the present...

>Ranma has received a partial cure for his curse by the spirit entity  
<br>called Mistress 9. She will eventually take his girl's body,  
freeing

>him entirely, so now he poses as Tomoe Hotaru. Unfortunately, he now  
<br>seems to have a few problems with the ladies, since he is  
inadvertently

>engaged to Hino Rei (he's taking lessons in Shinto), his old buddy  
<br>Ucchan, and the friendly Amazon Shampoo. That doesn't even start  
to

>include Mako-chan, or the fact that two of his best friends are only  
<br>three foot tall: Cologne and Chibi-Usa.

><br>In the last episode, Sailor Mars broke up with Saturn Knight (if  
you

>don't know, don't ask). Also, Mistress 9 revealed that she would  
<br>expected to succeed in splitting Ranma apart in one week. Ranma  
has

>also discovered that the person with access to the Gates Of Time  
(whom <br>he has sworn to destroy) is none other than his enemy  
Sailor Pluto.

><br>-----

>An Ending To Our Dreams<br>-----

><br>Ranma looked down on the blasted landscape and tried to find the

>satisfaction that he expected. Everyone who had ever opposed him was  
<br>dead. Everyone who had ever mocked or tormented him was dead.  
Even all

>those other people who did not know him - but surely would have  
<br>tormented him if they had known him - they were dead too. They  
were

>dead. They were all dead.<br>  
>Craters pocked the ground, some were simply the shattered rocks of  
<br>explosives, others were the fused glass of nuclear devices or  
powerful  
>magic. It was painfully obvious how well his enemies had fought, but  
<br>they had fallen. Noting was left, just the shattered remains of  
their  
>civilisation. <br>  
>He had expected to feel glee at the destruction of the Moon Kingdom,  
<br>and the deaths of almost every person in the solar system, but  
instead  
>he just felt empty. He turned to his wife and looked at her. With  
her <br>head bowed so that she could look at the ground so many  
kilometres  
>beneath them, her short black hair fell forward and covered her  
face. <br>"Do you regret this?"  
><br>All she did was look up at him and he knew that he should have  
never  
>asked that question. Of course she regretted it. It did not matter  
to <br>her that the people of the Kingdom hated and feared her as  
much as they  
>did him, she loved them anyway. Maybe that was why he did not feel  
the <br>elation he desired. She cared, so by extension: he cared. Her  
pain was  
>his pain, his pain was hers.<br>  
>They were already holding hands so that her magic could shield him  
from <br>the cold, hard vacuum of space, so he carefully changed his  
grip and  
>placed an arm around her shoulder. Giving someone a hug when you are  
<br>suspended a hundred kilometres up, and while they are holding a  
eight  
>foot pole arm is not an easy thing to do. It didn't stop him though,  
in <br>their short years together they had overcome difficulties  
greater than  
>that together. It is not easy being so feared that you are sent so  
far <br>from the place that you are supposed to defend, causing you  
arrive too  
>late to save anything.<br>  
>Holding her close, Ranma realised that he did regret one thing about  
<br>the passing of the Moon Kingdom: Queen Serenity was also dead. In  
time  
>he had grown to respect her. Not love her as his wife did, nor was  
<br>there the adulation of all her other subjects. Just respect.  
Respect  
>for a woman who did her job well, who was just and fair to all her  
<br>subjects. A woman who was now dead and lying somewhere within the  
  
>shattered castle beneath their feet.<br>  
>"What do we do now? Is anyone still alive? Is Beryl still alive?"  
For a <br>moment thoughts of fighting and revenge flittered through  
his head. He  
>would not have fought for her while she was alive, but Serenity's  
own <br>sacrifice made him willing to fight for her after her death.  
  
><br>Her voice was as quiet as a whisper. "There are still people  
alive.  
>Some of the shelters on Earth are still intact. Beryl is gone.  
Everyone <br>else is gone."  
><br>"Even Saturn's colonies?"  
><br>She leaned her head on his chest and the wetness of her tears

confirmed

>it like no other answer could. If those meddling Outer Senshi were  
<br>still here, he would have killed them himself. It was their fault that

>he and his wife had been so far out-system training. So far out-system <br>that when Beryl's genocidal revolution began, all they could do was

>come running and watch as bright lights flared on every habitable  
<br>planet and moon. The cowardly Outer Senshi were so afraid of his wife

>that they would rather see the Kingdom in ruins by an enemy than risk  
<br>her being present to defend it. He ground his teeth and held her close.

>She would need his support today as much as he needed hers every other <br>day.

><br>Ranma took her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. They both

>needed her strength in this time of trial. "What are we going to do  
<br>now? Do we head down to Earth and look for survivors, or should we

>check out the Palace first?"<br>

>His wife shook her head. "There's no-one left on the moon. Beryl made  
<br>sure of that. Queen Serenity sent me a message. She couldn't save

>everyone... but she managed to... to send some of our souls into the  
<br>future... She wanted her daughter and some others to have another

>chance."<br>

>He smiled. It was perfect. He would be able to live his entire life  
<br>here with her, then when they were reborn in the future, they would be

>able to share each other all over again. "That's wonderful! How do we  
<br>do it? How do we go into the future?"

><br>Closing her eyes, she turned her head looked past her shoulder and down

>at the moon again. "She couldn't send us. All she could send was me."<br>

>That stopped him cold. She was leaving? She would leave him? This  
<br>wasn't supposed to happen. They were supposed to be together forever.

>The two of them, inseparable. He needed her. A small whimper escaped  
<br>his lips before Ranma felt her small body pushed against his chest.

>Holding him tightly her voice was muffled, but he could make out the  
<br>words clearly enough.

><br>"I'm not leaving you. I can't leave you. You're a part of me. You are

>my heart, without you, I would have let Beryl take this place without a  
<br>fight if she wanted it. Without you there is no reason for being in the  
>future."<br>

>"What can we do? There's no way that you can fight the queen's magic.  
<br>The Glaive can't help with that."

><br>She might have smiled. He could feel her face move, and her voice was

>happier now that she had told him the hardest part. "I've had an idea.  
<br>The whole idea was to send the Senshi forward, right? What I think I

>can do is free your soul to travel too. If I do it right, I can link  
<br>your soul, and you'll follow me into the future. Wherever I am

>reincarnated, you should be too. I think I can do it. I hope."<br>

>Ranma smiled down at the crown of her head. The short black hair  
<br>smelled so nice as he lay his cheek on top of her head. "I know  
you

>can. I'll always follow wherever you lead. When you need me, I'll be  
<br>there. They'll never keep us apart."

><br>After standing there for half an hour just relishing the feeling  
of

>being so close to each other, his wife moved and smiled up at him.  
She <br>still looked the same age that she did when he married her.  
Something

>about her magic, he assumed. None of the Senshi ever aged, they only  
<br>died from war or grievous accidents. Something about her youthful

>appearance and the plans for reincarnation worried him for a  
moment.<br>

>"We have to prepare for the future. Close your eyes for just a  
<br>second, you know how you hate the landings."

><br>There was a brief sensation of movement, then they were on the  
ground.

>The moon was grey and lifeless, a desert where once there had been  
<br>paradise. He guessed they were standing in what had once been the  
main

>barracks for the Queen's personal guard. Judging by the size of the  
<br>crater, they would be able to see this one all the way from  
Earth.

><br>She gave him a quick kiss and stepped away. "This won't hurt  
even for a

>moment. DEATH... REBORN... REVOLUTION!"<br>

>It was her ultimate attack; an attack that could destroy an entire  
<br>world, or cleanse all evidence of the Moon Kingdom. As he watched  
the

>white ribbons stream from Sailor Saturn, he realised that she was  
<br>right: there was no p---.

><br>Hotaru sat bolt upright in bed, sweat pouring from her small  
brow. She

>had to give up those super-deluxe Okonomiyaki before bed. They were  
<br>giving her weird dreams again.

><br>\* \* \*

><br>The first golden rays of sunlight were beginning to tickle the  
tallest

>buildings, chasing the darkness of the night away. Even though the  
<br>morning still carried the subtle reminders of an unusually cool  
night,

>it was showing all the signs that it would be a perfect day. The  
<br>fingers of light that reached down through the city's towers  
showed a

>sky clear of clouds; as bright and clear as any city's air could  
be.<br>

>The sounds of leaves rustling in the park combined with the noises  
of <br>early morning delivery trucks. These were the only sounds that  
could be

>heard in the area, despite the vigorous workout that was happening  
in <br>the middle of the rolling grass. A single man stood there: his  
hair

>would just touch his shoulders if it was not held back by a small  
pony <br>tail.

><br>His pose was relaxed but focused. Fists were clenched loosely,



and his

>arms rested by his side. At some unseen signal, he again leapt into the <br>air, cresting the branches at the top of the tree beside him. For a

>surprising period of time, the energetic young man hung suspended in <br>mid air, his every limb a flurry of motion. After a considerable time,

>the martial artist began his descent, continuing the dazzling training <br>Kata the whole way.

><br>Despite a fall that would have seriously injured lesser men, he

>instantly bounced backwards, combining his movements with a rolling <br>kick. The kick became a cartwheel as he bounced up on his hands,

>continuing the sequence of attacks as he moved across the park.<br>

>Throughout the entire acrobatic extravaganza, not a single sound was <br>heard other than the wind and the passing vehicles. After all, aerial

>attacks were the speciality of the Anything Goes School of martial <br>arts, and Saotome Ranma was the master of that school.

><br>Jogging back to the city after his workout, Ranma luxuriated in the

>feeling of power that his fully grown male body gave him. Only a week <br>to go, only a week to go, Ranma repeated as a mantra. The spiritual

>entity called Mistress 9 was currently having an out-of-body experience <br>so to speak. Out of his body really, since she did not actually have

>one yet. It all meant that while she was off talking to her associates <br>and organising some of the last minute plans, he could goof off and

>just relax. Sometime tonight she would drop back in and they would be <br>ready for the last week of work.

><br>Ranma did not usually work out so late in the day; he normally

>preferred to be done before dawn, because fewer people would see just <br>how good he was. His level of skill often seemed unnatural to people

>and scared them away, and he did not want to do that to any of his <br>friends currently. Once he was cured of the curse and had that pressure

>off his shoulders, Ranma would consider starting to show some of his <br>closer friends a little more of his true ability. After all, there is

>no point in being the best if you can't prove it now and again.<br>

>Moving at a steady jog that would cross the twenty kilometres back to <br>his foster father's house in an hour, Ranma considered what he would do

>today. It was shaping up to be a lovely Sunday, and he did not relish <br>the idea of spending it all indoors. Especially since he had stayed up

>all night making a dress for Rei-san. Well, almost all night. He had <br>managed a short nap, but that had been interrupted by another

>nightmare. They had gone away for a while, so he hoped that this was <br>just a single occurrence.

><br>Perhaps he could go over and annoy Rei-san for a while? No. That

>wouldn't be nice, since he was already making her wait until Monday  
<br>morning for the answer to her question. Who would have thought  
that a  
>tomboy like Rei-san would have asked him out? Ranma kept repeating  
to <br>himself that he was only going out with her because a tomboy  
like her  
>would never have a real chance of getting together with anyone  
else.<br>  
>All right, maybe Ucchan would be a better choice... Then again,  
maybe <br>not. She was always pretty busy on Sundays, so he would  
just be in the  
>way. For a fleeting moment the thought occurred to him that he could  
<br>help her in the restaurant, but that thought died of loneliness.  
Today  
>was much too nice to spend it serving tables or cooking food.<br>

>Then it dawned on him: Cologne-chan and Shampoo! Since they both  
worked <br>in the Nekohaten, one of them would be able to spare some  
time to talk  
>with him. Admittedly Shampoo was always a little too affectionate  
for <br>his tastes, but that was just how her people were. Hey,  
perhaps he  
>could train with her for a little bit. If she was the village  
champion <br>at the moment, he should help make sure that she did not  
lose her edge  
>before she returned to the Joketsuzoku.<br>  
>After dropping home for a leisurely wash and soak in the tub, Ranma  
<br>changed clothes and left for the Nekohaten. That meant he had  
changed  
>sex four times this morning and clothes only once. He woke up  
female, <br>trained as male, went female before returning to the  
Tomoe residence,  
>and finally back to male after he had finished his bath and left the  
<br>house. It was times like these that he really looked forward to  
the  
>time when he would be able to spend days - weeks even - consistently  
<br>male.  
><br>Ranma arrived at Cologne's restaurant at half past ten. It was  
the  
>perfect time to drop in for someone looking for a post-breakfast  
snack. <br>The girls would be getting ready for the lunch rush, but  
the crowds  
>would not be there yet. Just the right sort of time to get a quick  
bowl <br>of ramen to tide him over until lunch.  
><br>"Hey, Shampoo! How's --- Whoa!"  
><br>The surprised Ranma found himself holding a double armful of  
curves as  
>Shampoo crooned softly leaning against his chest. "Husband come  
visit <br>Shampoo? Husband want take Shampoo on date, yes?"

><br>Now he remembered why he usually tried to visit Cologne as a  
girl.  
>Shampoo was nice enough to Hotaru, but she certainly did not go out  
of <br>her way like she did for the male Ranma. Sometimes Ranma  
actually got  
>the feeling that Shampoo only liked Hotaru for the sake of her  
<br>'Husband'. After all, according to the popular myth which Ranma  
had  
>perpetuated, Hotaru was weak and frail; not at all like a real

Amazon.<br>

>He could tell that Shampoo was all Amazon, which included the fact that <br>she knew how to get her man. Real Amazons stressed the need of finding

>your perfect mate and then pursuing them until they were yours. With <br>the seductive way that Shampoo was holding him and kneading his

>shoulders, he guessed she could have almost any boy she wanted. Not <br>only was she sexy and willing, she was a talented fighter and quite

>smart once you got past her poor Japanese. Now if only he did not have <br>other reasons not to marry her...

><br>"Errr.... Shampoo, I think that guy wants to pay or something."

><br>Shampoo looked over her shoulder then gave the offending customer the

>briefest of glares. She could tell that she was making progress with <br>her husband, it was only a matter of time before he came around. With

>added bounce, she walked to the customer's table and took his money. <br>"Husband sit down. Shampoo make too, too delicious ramen."

><br>Now that was service! Trying not to pay attention to the way that

>Shampoo's skirt was so short you could almost see her armpits, Ranma <br>slid onto one of the seats. Juggling chopsticks, he glanced over to

>where Shampoo was assembling a ramen using her normal dazzling speed. <br>

>"Where's Cologne-chan? She's usually here at this time of day."<br>

>"Great Grandmother go markets. Get new foods, add ancient Amazon <br>delicacy to menu."

><br>"Aww, you're not doing that thing with the parboiled ox hoof, are you?"

>Ranma suppressed a shudder of disgust just thinking about it. It had <br>been a popular dish when he had arrived, but fortunately it had gone

>out of style. <br>

>"No. That too good for Japanese barbarians. This monkey seasoning for <br>noodles. Here, you eat!"

><br>So long as they weren't caught near the Spring Of The Drowned Monkey,

>that was fine with him. Since there were no other customers in the <br>restaurant, Shampoo slid into a seat opposite him and watched

>rapturously as he devoured the bowl of noodles.<br>

>He was just draining the last of the tasty liquid from the bowl when <br>something struck him as odd. Placing the dish back on the table he

>looked at Shampoo owlshly and blinked a couple of times. Although she <br>was just sitting there, she seemed to move in and out of focus a couple

>of times. <br>

>"I... don't feel too good..."<br>

>Abruptly, Ranma's face slammed down onto the table. The thin china bowl <br>shattered into a dozen pieces under his head, but it could hardly be

>heard over the sound of his snores. Shampoo looked down at her husband <br>to be with alarm. Picking him up by the pony tail, she

dropped his head  
>again, and his snores continued uninterrupted. <br>  
>"Shampoo no expect it work so fast."<br>  
>With just a little concern, Shampoo left the sleeping Ranma and  
walked <br>back into the kitchen. Picking up the recipe again, she  
ran her finger  
>down it until she came across the entry for sleeping powder. "Aiya!  
Not <br>two Tablespoon! Is two pinch!"  
><br>Giving the snoring form a quick glance, she walked back and put  
her  
>hands under his shoulders, pulling him from the seat. Since he would  
<br>probably be unconscious for the rest of the day, Shampoo decided  
to let  
>him lie on her bed and sleep it off. Perhaps he would understand how  
<br>much she loved him when he woke up in her room. Besides, somehow  
she  
>suspected that Great Grandmother would not entirely approve of her  
<br>latest plan to gain her husband. At least, not unless it worked.

><br>Before sleeping beauty could be left to rest, there was just one  
thing  
>left to do. Shampoo needed to remove the last obstacle that held her  
<br>husband in Japan. She knew now that Violent Tomboy Girl and  
Spatula  
>Girl were not his real reasons. Even he had said that his reason for  
<br>curing Violent Girl was not because he loved her. That left only  
one  
>other girl in his life, and she presented no real competition to a  
pure <br>bred Amazon.  
><br>Pulling out her shampoo and comb, she released Ranma's pony tail  
and  
>went to work. Two minutes later, he was sleeping on her bed, all his  
<br>problems solved. Smiling happily, Shampoo placed a quick kiss on  
his  
>handsome brow then returned to looking after the shop. Great  
<br>Grandmother would be so proud when Shampoo showed he how much her  
husband wanted to return to China with them.<br>  
>Four hours later, Ranma opened his eyes and looked around in  
confusion. <br>There was something wrong here. Something seriously  
wrong. This wasn't  
>his room. Wearily he tried to decide just what his room looked like,  
<br>but he wasn't sure. There was something it was...  
><br>A pile of leaves beside his father on the roadside...  
><br>A plain woven straw mat shared with some monks...  
><br>A hidden bunker, crouched with some soldiers...  
><br>A smiling face with beautiful black hair. She smiled up at  
him...  
><br>"Akane!"  
><br>Wobbling slightly, Ranma gained his feet and leaned against a  
wall.  
>This almost looked like a girl's room, and he couldn't remember  
being <br>in one of them before he woke up... Hey, all those voices  
and smells of  
>cooking. Could he be in a restaurant or something? Placing the palm  
of <br>his hand against his forehead, Ranma tried to sort out the  
memories. He  
>remembered a couple of places he went to eat, but why was he here?  
Why <br>was he asleep? Something seemed to be missing.

><br>Lurching over to the window, Ranma looked down onto the street below.

>Something was very wrong. Something was missing. Akane would know what <br>it was. He should go and see her. She would know. Even as he pushed

>open the window and jumped down to the street, something bothered him. <br>Akane was dead. But she couldn't be dead. He had spoken to her just the

>other day. He knew she was dead... Was she just sick? Would that <br>explain this tightness around his heart?

><br>Ranma knew that there was only one thing he could do. So he set his

>mouth firmly and moved down the road. First it was a drunken walk, then <br>a jog, finally he was feeling well enough to cover the rooftops in his

>normal leaping strides. He knew the shrine where Akane lived. His <br>father had engaged them to be married, if anything was wrong with

>Akane, he would find out there.<br>

>The first steps up to the shrine brought another round of confusing and <br>conflicting thoughts to Ranma. This was definitely the shrine where the

>tomboy lived, but there was something wrong. Where was the dojo? He had <br>always been able to see the dojo before as he came home... couldn't he?

>This was the School Of Anything Goes Shinto Martial Arts, wasn't it? By <br>the time he had reached the top step and was looking around the

>flagstones, Ranma was less sure. This didn't seem to be his home. He <br>recognised bits of it, and he knew that Akane was here; but it did not

>feel like home.<br>

>"Ranma? What are you doing here?"<br>

>Almost in a daydream, Ranma turned. The voice. He knew that voice. It <br>had to be her. It was angry, but at the same time caring. No two people

>could possibly be like that. She was standing there, holding the broom, <br>wearing a loose, white top and baggy red pants. Something about her

>face seemed odd, but it must be his Akane. It must. <br>

>With a move faster than comprehension, Ranma was beside her and held <br>her in his arms. His wife. He had been so sure that she was dead, but

>here she was. In the flesh. Holding her tightly, Ranma buried his face <br>in her lovely, long, black hair and breathed deeply. She smelled like

>cherry blossoms. He remembered how she almost always smelled of cherry <br>blossoms. She liked to use their scented oils before they made love.

><br>Something finally penetrated his bliss saturated brain and exploded

>like a bombshell. She was just standing there. She was not responding, <br>she had not even dropped her broom. All she was doing was shaking.

>Somehow in the distance he thought he could hear the sounds of people <br>cheering. "Akane? Are you ill? You're shaking."

><br>Small but strong arms suddenly forced themselves between the two of

>them and his wife pulled herself away from him. "Ranma, are you out

of <br>your mind? What on Earth do you think you are doing?"

><br>Ranma looked at his wife. Then he looked again. She was younger... or

>was she? He... he couldn't quite remember. Akane seemed all ages to him <br>at the same time. But this wasn't Akane. This was... "R...

Rei? No. Not

>Rei! You have to be Akane!"<br>

>He tried to grab her again but she backed away and swiped him across <br>the head with the broom. He knew who Rei was, she was a friend he had

>known for a little while. But the Rei he knew would never hit him, she <br>was nice and quiet. Not at all like his tomboy, Akane. This must be

>Akane! It must! She couldn't be dead!<br>

>When she swiped at his head again, he ducked under the blow and came in <br>close. Close enough to kiss his precious Akane. Only instinct save him

>from a blow that would cripple any man. Standing still in confusion he <br>looked as his wife back away with fear in her eyes. Was it possible

>that this was not really his wife?<br>

>"I... I think you better go now Ranma. Maybe you should come back some <br>other time when you're feeling better."

><br>The cheering had stopped and he could see a group of girls standing to

>the side, just around from the corner of the building. They did not <br>look entirely happy with him. Placing one hand to the side of his head,

>Ranma took a step back. The girl was looking less and less like Tendo <br>Akane and more like Hino Rei every second he stood there.

><br>Pain lanced through his skull, and Ranma gripped his head as he turned

>and lurched down the stairs at an approximation of a run. Somehow it <br>was becoming clear in small, jarring bursts. Akane was dead. He had

>held her in his arms as she died. She had been dead now for all of two <br>torturous years and he was trying to cheat on her with some school

>girl? What had happened to him? What was going on here? Where was his <br>home? How had he come to---

><br>The truck drove past, its driver completely oblivious to the puddle

>that he had just driven through. Totally ignorant of the little girl <br>that was standing on the side of the road, dripping.

><br>\* \* \*

><br>Cologne - Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku Amazons, fearsome warrior and

>great grandmother of the Amazon warrior Shampoo - walked into the <br>Nekohaten. Her day had been entirely successful, and she was looking

>forward to working with Shampoo for the night shift. Being a mighty <br>warrior was wonderful in a society that valued them, but being in Japan

>had given her a well earned holiday. Council intrigues and the <br>children's foolishness would wear anyone down after a while. The simple

>elegance of running a restaurant brought back to mind the simple, <br>earthy pleasures of her own childhood. Having her best friend

from her  
>childhood around did not hurt either.<br>  
>After she had dropped her new ingredients in the cold storage room,  
<br>Cologne deftly inserted herself into the cooking area, seamlessly  
  
>taking over from Shampoo and allowing the considerably younger - and  
<br>marginally more attractive - girl to concentrate on serving the  
  
>customers.<br>  
>"You seem awfully happy tonight, Shampoo. Did Ranma visit you  
today?"<br>  
>Shampoo nodded as she collected another two bowls of steaming  
noodles. <br>"Husband still here."  
><br>Cologne raised one eyebrow and looked inquisitively at her great  
  
>granddaughter as she continued to make ramen. "Really? Still here?  
I'm <br>afraid my eyes are getting too old. I cannot see him anywhere  
child."  
><br>Shampoo gave a tinkling laugh and shook her head. "Husband still  
in  
>bedroom. He sleep for long time."<br>  
>Well, well. Maybe Ranma was not as shy as Cologne had grown to  
expect. <br>"I did not anticipate my friend to be so forward."  
  
><br>As she blushed and began clearing a couple of tables, Shampoo  
  
>elaborated. "Shampoo have too, too clever plan. Shampoo use Xai Fang  
<br>Gao Shiatsu technique, make Husband forget girl who keep him in  
Japan."  
><br>Cologne slapped her hand down on the counter with a crack like a  
rifle  
>shot. "You foolish girl! I thought I raised you better than that.  
Not <br>only is the Xia Fang Gao prone to loss of effect over long  
periods,  
>which makes it totally unsuited for use against you husband, he is  
also <br>an Amazon. Using that technique on a member of the tribe  
without their  
>permission is punishable by the strongest measures! You are only  
lucky <br>that it was Ranma, anyone else would probably demand that  
punishment,  
>he's is likely to go easy on you. Besides, I think you established  
<br>before that it was not just his ties with Hino girl that kept him  
here.  
>What where you thinking?"<br>  
>Shampoo paled. She could not remember the last time that her great  
<br>grandmother had yelled at her with such genuine anger in her  
voice.  
>"Shampoo learn lesson. Shampoo not make him forget Violent Girl.  
<br>Shampoo make Husband forget Little Sister... If he remember when  
back  
>in China, he forgive. Husband no seem to like Little Sister,  
anyway."<br>  
>The room was silent bar the sound of patrons. Turning around,  
Shampoo <br>looked for her great grandmother, but the room was empty  
of ancient  
>Amazons. Surely even she would what a good idea it was when she  
calmed <br>down. She might not have approved of the idea initially,  
but now that  
>it was done, there was no way that she would continue to object.<br>

>In just two incredible bounces, Cologne's cane propelled her from the <br>rear doorway to stand nose to nose with Shampoo. "Ranma is not in your  
>bedroom. Make it clear to me: why did you think he was there?"<br>

>Shampoo gulped. Her great grandmother rarely looked serious, and now <br>she was actually worried. What could be so bad about doing a little  
>memory work on Ranma if it got her a husband? Shampoo might get in <br>trouble, but there was nothing dangerous about it, was there?

><br>"Shampoo give Ranma sleep powder in ramen."  
><br>"And then you suppressed his memories of Hotaru. Correct?"

><br>The lavender haired girl gave a slightly fearful nod. Had she done  
>something wrong? Ignoring the customers that were beginning to queue <br>up, Cologne sat Shampoo in a chair and drew forth all the details the  
>girl could remember. Eventually the older woman took a chair opposite <br>her and sighed in weariness.  
><br>"So really, you do not know when Ranma left your bedroom."

><br>"Shampoo no know. Recipe book say he sleep all day."  
><br>"You will find that Ranma is a quite unusual boy. Because I have sworn  
>to him that I would never reveal his curse to you, I cannot tell you <br>all the ways that this could cause problems. I am not even sure of them  
>myself.<br>>"Suffice it to say that because of his curse, your actions against <br>Hotaru could have very serious repercussions for him." Looking Shampoo  
>in the eye, Cologne kept her voice level and devoid of the strong <br>emotions she felt. "There are likely to be even stronger repercussions  
>for you if anything happens to him as a result of his."<br>

>Seeing her only living descendant in such confusion and so obviously <br>frightened, Cologne decided to reveal just a little of the truth before  
>she went out to find Ranma. If she could find him and undo Shampoo's <br>actions, there should be no problems. If she failed... that did not  
>really bear thinking about. The girl side of Ranma comprised almost the <br>entire time that Ranma had been alive since his wife had died. There  
>was no question that Ranma had loved Akane: he had managed to carry the <br>flame of love for over three hundred years while the subject of his  
>affections was no more. The only time that Ranma had been male - other <br>than recently - was when he was at his worst. When things were too  
>depressing, she knew that Ranma would return to his male form and weep <br>for his wife.  
><br>If he could not remember those passing years; if he could not remember  
>the friends his girl half had made; if he could not remember the <br>healing he had done, Ranma may well be out of his mind with grief.



><br>"Right now all Ranma is probably thinking about is his dead wife. With  
>Hotaru suppressed, he is probably a different man now. I'm going out to <br>look for him. If by any chance he returns... just try and keep him  
>here. Don't force him, and above all, do NOT attempt to hold him  
<br>against his will. I do not know how good his control will be at this  
>time."<br>  
>Before she let a very confused Shampoo, Cologne went back to the  
<br>kitchen and took a thermos filled with hot water. She did not know who  
>Ranma would become if he was splashed with cold water now. The memory  
<br>block would almost certainly work in reverse, depriving Hotaru of the  
>Ranma side of her existence. Who knows what the girl would be like  
<br>without any memory of a childhood, without any of the formative years  
>that shaped her personality? It hardly bore thinking on. When she left  
<br>the Nekohaten, she did not even wave goodbye to Shampoo.

><br>Moving down the street as fast as her cane could carry her, Cologne  
>tried to catalogue the places that Ranma may have gone. To the temple  
<br>maiden's, almost certainly. To the home that his girl form had  
>stayed... perhaps. Maybe even to Ukyo's shop. What if Ranma had decided  
<br>to go back to where he and Akane had once lived? Or to Poland or China?  
>Or even just somewhere else in Japan he had lived. The possibilities  
<br>were endless. With a snort, Cologne decided to stop listing places;  
>there were simply too many.<br>  
>One of the things that scared her the most was the possibility that  
<br>Ranma might get into a fight. Would he even realise his own true power?  
>His school of fighting recommended going all-out unless you were sure  
<br>of victory. If he did that... Well, he obviously had not done so yet,  
>otherwise Cologne would have certainly heard the explosions.<br>

>Arriving at the place she had nominated as "most likely to be visited  
<br>by a deranged Ranma", Cologne dropped off her staff and used it to rap  
>on the front door of the house located at the Hikawa Shrine. A brief  
<br>period of quiet was followed by the sound of footsteps, then the door  
>opened.<br>  
>"Ahhh! A monster!" Quick as a whip the elder Hino priest pulled out a  
<br>ward and began to wave it at Cologne. "Back! Back I say!"

><br>With a grimace but no real malice, Cologne bonked him on the head with  
>her staff. She did not have time to deal with him today. Besides, fancy  
<br>a wrinkled prune like him calling her a monster! With a few quick pokes  
>of her staff, Cologne forced the harmless elder backwards until the  
<br>doorway was clear and she could slip past. She was about to start  
>searching the house for her quarry when the girl presented herself.

<br>

>Standing straight and tall, with luxurious black hair that went past  
<br>her narrow waist, Hino Rei reminded the Matriarch of how she  
herself

>had once looked. Despite the calls of her grandfather, Rei  
apparently <br>had decided to face the unknown monster head on. She  
was running down

>the hall holding a trio of her own wards. If Cologne was any judge  
of <br>power, these wards were substantially more effective than the  
earlier

>ones waved at her.<br>

>"Where's the monster?... Oh, it's you Granny." She almost sounded  
<br>disappointed. "Stop that Gramps. This is Cologne, she's the great

>grandmother of one of Ranma's girlfriends."<br>

>"Of course! I knew that! Do you think I can't tell the difference  
<br>between an old woman and a dangerous monster? Humph. I was just  
testing

>your reaction."<br>

>Affecting an insulted air, Grandfather Hino stuck his nose in the  
air <br>and walked out of the house. All the while he mumbled about  
how slow

>Rei had been coming to save her poor, defenceless grandfather.<br>

>"Sorry about that Granny. His eyesight's not the best these days.  
<br>Sometimes I think his mind is going too. Can I help you with

>something?"<br>

>"As a matter of fact you can, Child. I am seeking Ranma. Have you  
seen <br>him?"

><br>Rei puffed out her breath and flicked her hair back. "Seen him?  
He was

>practically hanging all over me earlier today. If you ask me, I  
think <br>he must have been drinking."

><br>"Interesting, I did not expect this. Do you have any idea why?"

><br>"I don't know. Is it the anniversary of his wife's death? He  
seemed

>pretty hung up on her. He even thought I was Akane for a while  
there!"<br>

>Cologne leaned forward on her staff so that she could get a better  
look <br>at Rei. Perhaps she did look like Ranma's dead wife, it was  
hard for

>her to say. Cologne had seen Ranma's paintings three hundred years  
ago, <br>but she was only a little girl then. That much time could  
dull the

>memories even in a mind as fine as hers. <br>

>Deciding that Amazon problems should stay within the tribe, Cologne  
<br>decided to give an abridged version of the truth. "Ranma has been

>affected by the same memory technique that was used on you. My great  
<br>granddaughter did it in an attempt to help the boy, but made a  
small

>mistake. Our friend is likely to be feeling rather confused at the  
<br>moment. Do you know where he is at the moment?"

><br>"No, I'm afraid not. He just ran off earlier when I told him I  
wasn't

>Akane."<br>

>Turning, Cologne hopped out the door then stopped and looked back at  
<br>Rei. As much as she wanted Shampoo to be the girl that Ranma

married,  
>she would not put Rei at risk just for that. At least, she would not  
<br>put her at risk over something as minor as this. "I also have  
reason to  
>believe that Hotaru may not be entirely well at the moment either.  
If <br>you see either of them, do not hesitate to call Shampoo or  
myself. It  
>could be vital to your safety."<br>  
>Leaving a confused temple maiden behind her, Cologne sped off to the  
<br>next destination on her list. The Tomoe home was a good half  
hour's hop  
>away for her. Not for the first time, Cologne begrudged the years  
that <br>had made her old and frail. When she was younger, she would  
have been  
>able to sprint the distance in less time, but in those days she  
might <br>not have had the knowledge she possessed these days.  
Knowledge  
>necessary to cure her friend.<br>  
>Finding the Tomoe home was no great difficulty, getting in might be  
a <br>little harder. Since she had been there before, Cologne was  
familiar  
>with Kaori, the housekeeper. Kaori seemed obsessed with the idea  
that <br>Hotaru should not have visitors, causing the woman to deny  
Hotaru's  
>presence even if guests knew Hotaru was there. <br>  
>In the interests of speed, Cologne skirted the house and stood  
looking <br>up at the window to Hotaru's room. Climbing a smooth wall  
might be  
>difficult for most people, but Cologne was armed with three  
centuries <br>of secret tricks. Scrambling up the wall with the same  
apparent ease  
>that she could crawl across a floor, Cologne soon reached Hotaru's  
<br>window and stepped inside. Much as she suspected, it was empty.  
The bed  
>was made, and nothing looked like it had been disturbed. This did  
not <br>look like the place that an amnesiac had visited searching  
for their  
>identity. <br>  
>Looking around the room, Cologne contemplated a last resort and  
<br>eventually gave in. When Ranma had revealed to her that he would  
be  
>cured, Ranma had told Cologne about a spirit entity. While the  
spirit <br>apparently watched over Ranma much of the time, she was  
known to take  
>time off to do her own work. Surely this must be the case today,  
else <br>the spirit would have convinced Ranma to either get help  
from Cologne  
>or to return here. That meant that the spirit was not with Ranma...  
<br>possibly even in this house at the moment.  
><br>Feeling slightly foolish, Cologne squared her shoulders and  
raised her  
>voice. "Mistress 9! Mistress 9! Can you hear me? I need to speak to  
you <br>about Ranma. Can you hear me?"  
><br>She tried twice more before a ethereal presence began to form in  
the  
>room. It had the shape of a tall, thin woman, with long waving hair.  
<br>The spirit itself was very dim, even in the low light of the  
evening  
>shadows. When the spirit spoke, Cologne had to strain her ears just  
to <br>hear her.

><br>"You would be Cologne. Ranma has told me a great things about you. What

>is it you want?"<br>

>"I want Ranma. Where is he?"<br>

>Even though shadows seemed to cloak the figure, Cologne swore she saw a <br>brief flash of anger and hatred cross the face. It vanished quickly,

>but it was enough to make her question the friendship of the spirit  
<br>that claimed she was helping Ranma for selfless reasons.

><br>"You cannot have him. The boy is mine and my master's."

><br>"I do not mean I want to own him, foolish woman. I need to speak to

>him. He has been accidentally afflicted by something. Something that I <br>can undo."

><br>Mistress 9 concentrated for a few moments before a look of alarm

>crossed her face and her movements became erratic and distressed.

"I... <br>I cannot find him. His mind has vanished! No! All that work, wasted. I

>will never be ready in time for my master's arrival."<br>

>Through force of habit, Cologne swung her staff trying to knock some  
<br>sense into the bereft woman-spirit. The staff slipped through the

>apparition harmlessly, but it did capture her attention. "Ranma is not <br>dead. If you cannot sense him, it means that his curse has been

>activated, and his mind is just sleeping. Hopefully he will come back <br>here at some time. When he does, call me on this number. I will be able

>to restore him to normalcy."<br>

>After she dropped a business card for the Nekohaten on the floor,  
<br>Cologne bounced out the window. Mistress 9 disturbed her somehow, even

>if only for the way she habitually concealed herself. If she had  
<br>nothing to hide, why was hiding second nature to her? Leaving the house

>at her best speed, Cologne sincerely hoped that Ranma knew what he was <br>doing.

><br>Inside the house, Mistress 9 faded into nothing again. As she faded,

>all that could be seen was her smile of joy. Things might be easier  
<br>than she ever suspected.

><br>\* \* \*

><br>Eighty seven minutes before Cologne's visit to Ranma's home, Kuonji

>Ukyo was cooking Okonomiyaki. This in itself was not at all unusual,  
<br>especially since the Sunday night rush tended to be a rather busy time.

>What was strange was the way one of her best friends walked past the  
<br>front door of the Ucchan. Tomoe Hotaru did not walk in, she did not

>wave, she did not even turn her head to smile at the chef behind the  
<br>grill. All the little girl did was walk past slowly, almost like a

>sleepwalker.<br>

>With a dexterity born from years of practice, Ukyo tossed the two  
<br>cooking delicacies onto plates and dashed to the front door. On her way

>she deposited the food on the appropriate customer's tables with nary a <br>glance. "Hey, Hotaru-chan! Where are you going?"

><br>Slowly, as if in a daze, Hotaru stopped and turned back to the

>restaurant. Pushing her black hair back from where it covered her eyes, <br>the short girl gave the smiling chef a long appraisal. "I know you..."

>You're... Kuonji Ukyo... Ucchan."<br>

>Kneeling down, Ukyo placed her head at the same height as the other <br>girl and beckoned her over. "Are you all right, Sugar? You sound a

>little... I don't know... spaced out."<br>

>"I'm not sure. Do you know who I am?"<br>

>"Huh? Sure I do. You're Tomoe Hotaru... Do you want to come in and sit <br>down?"

><br>"I'm glad. I keep hearing all these other names, and I'm not sure which

>is me. You only have one name, but I seem to have so many. And they're <br>all different. I keep thinking I should be doing something else, but I

>can't remember what..."<br>

>Taking her hand, Ukyo led the small girl into the shop. For as long as <br>she had known her, Hotaru had been a bright and happy girl, just like

>Ukyo. Now... Now she seemed like all of that brightness and zest for <br>living had been lost somehow.

><br>When Ukyo led Hotaru to a chair, the little girl sat down and stared

>straight ahead. That was all, she did not speak or look around. It was <br>as though she was an actor on stage who had forgotten her lines; simply

>moving where the director pointed. "Hotaru-chan, did something happen <br>to you? You don't look so hot. Should I call your father?"

><br>"Off... Yes. There's something missing. I don't know what it is. I

>think I should keep looking."<br>

>"Oh, no you don't. You stay here and wait for your father. I'll give <br>him a call right away."

><br>Without taking her eye off the girl, Ukyo dialled her friend's home. As

>she cradled the phone against her neck, Ukyo took change from a pair of <br>customers who had finished their meals. There were a few more lining up

>to be served, but something told her that it might be a good idea to <br>wait before she took their orders. "Hello?... Oh, Kaori-san. Is Tomoe-

>san there?... Busy in his lab? But this is really important---

You're <br>sure? There's no way you could get him for me?... I see.

OK, thanks for

>your time."<br>

>Casting nervous glances between her shell-shocked looking friend and <br>the customers she had lining up, Ukyo made a hard decision. With a

>polite bow and effusive apologies Ukyo told the assembled people that <br>she would not be able to prepare dinner for them.

Unfortunately there

>was a personal problem that would mean the Ucchan would have to close <br>early tonight.

><br>After she turned off the grill and gave some of her tools a quick  
>rinse, Ukyo sat by Hotaru and waited for those customers already eating <br>to finish and leave. She had already flipped her sign to "closed" to  
>dissuade any more customers, so while they sat there Ukyo tried to draw <br>Hotaru out of her shell, but the little girl seemed confused and  
>apathetic. Only once in the half hour that they waited did she show any <br>sign of animation. Considering the unusual condition her friend was in,  
>Ukyo decided to dissuade her from having the sparring session she <br>desired.  
><br>Eventually the last of the Ucchan's customers had paid and left.

>Placing all the dirty dishes in a pile where she could deal with them <br>on her return, Ukyo took Hotaru by the hand and led her out the door.  
>With a final stop to lock the door, the pair left for Hotaru's home.<br>  
>Needless to say it was a scowling Kaori that greeted them at the door. <br>The tall woman in the red dress took one look at Hotaru and immediately  
>whisked the girl inside. Ukyo barely had time to place her foot in the <br>door before it was slammed shut. Kaori looked up at the chef from where  
>she was examining Hotaru and glared at her.<br>  
>"What do you want?"<br>  
>"What do I want?! What do you think I want? I want to make sure she's <br>OK!"  
><br>Kaori straightened and took Hotaru's hand in her own. The little girl  
>looked at the linked hands with indifference, but she did not object to <br>them. "She will be perfectly all right. My master's first requirement  
>is that this girl is seen to in every way. I shall tend to her until he <br>is able to provide treatment."  
><br>Taken aback by the harsh bluntness of the maid, Ukyo stumbled for  
>words. Eventually she nodded her head and backed away. She might be <br>Hotaru's friend, but she was not actually her family. If her father  
>thought it was best the Kaori look after the girl, then there was not <br>much that Ukyo could do about it. On the other hand, she could  
>certainly come back tomorrow and check on her friend.<br>

>"Well... I guess I'll see you tomorrow then."<br>  
>"That will not be necessary."<br>  
>"Oh, I think it will. Hotaru and I have been looking after each other <br>longer than you've been around. You can be damn sure that I'll be here  
>just as soon as the morning rush is done!"<br>  
>Kaori set her mouth in a line and pulled Hotaru behind her <br>protectively. "Do not bother. If you see the old woman, tell her that  
>she is not needed here either. She disturbed important work earlier <br>today, and we will not tolerate another disturbance tonight."

><br>With that the door closed and Hotaru was taken up to her

bedroom.

>Hotaru was only part way up the stairs when she felt something strange. <br>It was almost as though a wind had blown through her body, a faint

>pressure on her mind was all that remained. Instinctively she fought  
<br>back, causing Kaori to drop her hand as Hotaru began to glow a

>brilliant blue.<br>

>'Wait! Wait! I am your friend, Mistress 9! Don't do this!'  
<br>

>Eyes flicking back and forth frantically, Hotaru searched for the  
<br>source of the voice. Even as she searched, her confused thoughts

>anchored on a single memory, then an entire series. Mistress 9 was a  
<br>spirit. She had met her on a train one night. Since that time, the

>spirit had been helping her... helping her to... to...<br>

>The blue glow faded and Hotaru absently allowed herself to again be  
led <br>to her room. 'You are Mistress 9. I remember you now. You  
were helping

>me to... I... I don't know. You were helping me to...'  
<br>

>'I was helping you to get better. You have been very sick.'  
<br>

>'Sick? Sick. Yes. I remember being sick. I... why was I sick? I'm  
never <br>sick.'

><br>While Kaori sat her on the bed and changed her clothes for  
sleep,

>Hotaru continued her conversation. Mistress 9 was a friend. She was  
<br>trying to help Hotaru get better. There was a lot that needed to  
be

>done, but Hotaru and Mistress 9 were working together to achieve  
it.<br>

>Deep in her mind, Hotaru could feel the echo of truth to this. There  
<br>were edges of doubt even in her memories, but as before, Hotaru  
pushed

>them down. She felt so confused now. If she had not wanted to know  
<br>everything about Mistress 9 before... before whatever had  
happened to

>her memory, she did not want to know now. <br>

>Sliding beneath the covers, Hotaru laid her head on the pillow,  
blinked <br>once at Kaori and closed her eyes. Even though Mistress 9  
kept talking,

>Hotaru let sleep claim her. It was so confusing. There was something  
<br>missing, but she was not sure what. Perhaps she would remember in  
the

>morning.<br>

>Monday morning came as it so often does, but no mysteries were  
<br>revealing in the dawning sunlight. Just as confused and filled  
with the

>same unnamed longing, Hotaru lay staring at the ceiling until  
Mistress <br>9 asked that she rise and prepare herself for breakfast.

><br>Routine seemed to flow easily to her hands. Dressing in the drab

>coloured school uniform was a task that she had done many times in  
the <br>past and it happened almost automatically. She was not sure  
why she did

>it, but she did it nonetheless. Once she was ready, Hotaru walked  
<br>downstairs and sat at the dinner table. Both her memories and  
Mistress

>9 assured her that food would soon arrive. Once again her friend  
<br>Mistress 9 was right; food did appear and Hotaru ate.  
><br>It may have been good or it may have been bad, but the food that  
she  
>was eating was not what Hotaru was missing. There was something that  
<br>she needed, but no matter how much she tried, she could not quite  
pin  
>down the details. Mistress 9 was little help, all she could  
recommend <br>was avoiding school and spending the day in her  
father's laboratory.  
>For some reason that filled the girl with a unspecified dread that  
<br>caused her to reject the suggestion. Something had to happen  
after  
>school, something important. She knew she needed to deliver a  
message <br>to someone, but she was not sure what the message was.

><br>The sound of knocking from the front door caught her attention.

>Normally it would have passed unnoticed, but she felt a brief  
flicker <br>as Mistress 9 left her mind and then returned in short  
order. Hotaru  
>could almost feel the spirit smile as she spoke.<br>  
>'It is someone that you know. If you wish to find out what is  
missing, <br>if you want to know what has made you so confused, I  
would recommend  
>that you let me take control for a short time.'  
>As the conversation was purely mental, it was very rapid, allowing  
<br>Hotaru to ask questions without causing a noticeable delay. 'I  
didn't  
>know you could do that.'  
>'Normally I could not, but if you let me I can. It's perfectly safe,  
<br>you could take control back anytime you want.'  
><br>There was something about the way that Mistress 9 made that  
statement  
>that worried Hotaru. But then, Mistress 9 was her friend. She would  
not <br>lie. It must be safe.  
><br>'I... OK'  
><br>There was a twisting sensation, and Hotaru tried to move with  
it. She  
>could feel the sensations of dizziness then dislocation as she  
suddenly <br>found herself looking with a slightly different  
perspective. Her eyes  
>no longer tracked as she desire, her hands no longer followed her  
<br>commands: Mistress 9, her friend had succeeded.  
><br>'What are you doing now?'  
><br>'Now that I have access to the body, I am just casting a quick  
spell to  
>help things move smoothly.'  
>'But... But that's a spell of binding...'  
>Hotaru's mouth curved into a cruel smile as she finished the spell.  
<br>When she spoke, it was not with the same childlike innocence or  
calm  
>adult wisdom that normally issued from the mouth. Now the tone was  
<br>mocking and cold. "But of course. You did not really think I  
would be  
>foolish enough to allow you to interfere when I had control, did  
you?"<br>  
>Inside her mind, Hotaru struggled against the magical barriers that  
<br>held her in place, by they were too tight. There was still  
something



>missing, but now she knew rage and anger. Deceived! Deceived and played <br>like a fool! A burning need for vengeance arose within her soul,  
>demanding that she cast out the person who she had foolishly allowed to <br>take possession of her body. With a mental howl of anguish, Hotaru  
>threw herself against the barrier that held her tight. She might break <br>them eventually, but she was certain that it would not be soon.  
>Whatever the spell was that had been used on her, she felt that it was <br>something Mistress 9 excelled at, obviously taking the spirit only the  
>briefest of time to cast.<br>  
>Numb with dread, Hotaru could only watch as Mistress 9 stood and walked <br>to the front door. Placing one hand on the doorknob, she turned it and  
>opened the door to their unsuspecting visitor.<br>  
>"Hello, Chibi-Usa. It is \_so\_ nice to see you today."<br>  
>"Are... Are you all right, Hotaru-chan? Rei-san said that you might be <br>sick... you don't sound too well."  
><br>Hotaru released an echoing laugh completely at odds with her normal  
>behaviour. "Oh, yes, little one. You can definitely help me."<br>

>As Hotaru drew back her arm, Chibi-Usa heard the frantic sound of an <br>old woman yelling at her. In slow motion, she turned and saw Hotaru's  
>friend Cologne moving towards her at a speed faster than she thought <br>someone her age should be able to move.  
><br>The old woman looked like she was going to run straight into her, and  
>that scared Chibi-Usa. It did not scare her half as much as the cruel <br>leer that Hotaru was wearing, nor the ominous black shadow that  
>flickered around her friend's hand. A hand that was rapidly descending <br>to strike her chest.  
><br>In the one flickering instant it was over and Chibi-Usa barely had time  
>to scream. The old woman was definitely going to hit her, but she was <br>shouting something about Shiatsu and roasting chestnuts. But then her  
>best friend hit her, and that was all she knew.<br>  
>Four meters away from Hotaru, Cologne spared a glimpse for the <br>unconscious girl in her arms and looked back at her friend. The little  
>pink haired girl was unconscious, but there were no marks on her.  
<br>Perhaps Cologne had actually been there in time with her rapid

>treatment of Shampoo's Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu. The next two seconds <br>showed that she had hoped too soon. Hotaru was holding something

>bright, shiny and angular in her hand, and the mocking laugh was <br>nothing that the real Hotaru would ever produce.

><br>"Ranma! Can you hear me? Try to remember! That should have released

>your memories!"<br>

>Trapped within his own skull, Ranma howled and redoubled his efforts on <br>the mental barriers, but they held fast. He remembered. He remembered

>everything thanks to Cologne. He also remembered Mistress 9 striking

<br>out and wrenching a Heart Crystal from Chibi-Usa. Only two groups of  
>people had ever shown themselves to have an active interest stealing  
<br>Heart Crystals. He had identified all three members of the fake  
>sailors. That meant that this must be one of the Witches 5. <br>  
>Weeping and crying in anguished self recrimination, Ranma beat  
<br>futilely, trying to regain control of his traitorous body. Months  
-  
>years even - of wilful ignorance had let him side with the enemy.  
His <br>all consuming lust for a cure had blinded him to the obvious.  
  
>Throughout the entire time he had known her, he had never questioned  
<br>Mistress 9 on her real intentions, allowing himself to be  
satisfied  
>with her simple platitudes and easy answers. Now, because of a  
moment's <br>weakness, she was the one in control. She was the one  
calling the  
>shots, and her first action had been to take the soul from the most  
<br>innocent and pure person he had ever known.  
><br>It tore at his soul to be trapped, watching as his body moved of  
its  
>violation. A hand raised itself under the dominion of a woman he now  
<br>realised was as much a demon as any he had known. That same hand  
fired  
>a deadly bolt of black energy at Cologne, forcing the old woman to  
<br>dodge and evade as she carried her precious cargo of Chibi-Usa.  
  
>Watching his best friend fight for her very life made Ranma wish he  
had <br>cut off his own hand centuries ago. Nothing was worth the  
thought of  
>his body attacking his friends; if he had eyes to cry, tears would  
have <br>fallen as he realised that this was no doubt just the  
beginning of  
>Mistress 9's true evil.<br>  
>An evil that he had been willing to blind himself to, just so he  
could <br>be cured. Cursing himself for his foolishness, Ranma set  
about  
>systematically breaking the magic bonds that held him prisoner in  
his <br>own mind. He needed to get free and stop Mistress 9, and he  
needed to  
>do in under twelve hours: because that was when he had to be able to  
<br>deliver his reply to Rei-san.  
><br>While Ranma was waging an internal battle against an invading  
entity,  
>Cologne was waging her own internal battle. Should she stay here and  
<br>help Ranma, or help the stricken child in her arms? Something had  
gone  
>horribly wrong, and her oldest, dearest friend was in dire trouble.  
Her <br>cure for the Xia Fang Gao Shiatsu should have released  
Ranma's mind and  
>restored his sanity. Despite that, Ranma (or Hotaru as he went by in  
<br>his current form) was still acting strangely.  
><br>Cologne may have been able to understand it if Hotaru was using  
one of  
>the many forms of attack that the little girl had known and  
displayed <br>before. The problem came because Hotaru was fighting in  
an entirely  
>different way. She shot magical bolts through the air; magic rather

<br>than Ki or Hotaru's preferred hand-to-hand. Not only that, but these  
>were some form of dark magic, evil looking streaks of blackness that  
<br>seemed to exude menace even as they passed.  
><br>If Cologne was willing to set down the little girl she was holding, she  
>was fairly confident that she could beat Hotaru the way that she was  
<br>acting. Hotaru's once phenomenal speed had almost vanished, her  
  
>bottomless bag of tricks had apparently been closed. While Cologne  
<br>jumped around holding her pink haired passenger, she tried to puzzle  
>out where she had seen this style of fighting before. It was sometime  
<br>recently, but with the difficulty of dodging energy blasts, she was  
>having a hard time concentrating.<br>  
>Finally Cologne realised, and it made her blood run cold. It was the  
<br>way that Hotaru was moving, it was the energy she could feel from those  
>magical blasts; they all reminded her Witch Mimete. Cologne had been  
<br>all too intimately acquainted with Mimete's Charm Buster, and the power  
>which narrowly missed her every time Hotaru fired seemed frighteningly  
<br>similar. Even the way that Hotaru was holding herself echoed of  
>Mimete's movements, as though they had trained or studied together.  
<br>  
>The main difference between Mimete and Hotaru seemed to be the  
<br>difference in speed and power. Mimete's attack had been devastating,  
>and while Hotaru's attacks were doing substantial damage to the  
<br>landscape, they were not as powerful as the Charm Buster. However,  
>Hotaru was firing them at a much greater rate than Mimete could  
<br>possibly manage. Most frightening was the slight hesitations and  
  
>uncertainties in Hotaru's movements. It was as though she expected to  
<br>be so much faster... almost as though she had not yet had time to cast  
>the spells needed to accelerate her actions the way that Mimete had.<br>  
>Mistress 9 stopped for a moment and both combatants looked at each  
<br>other. Mistress 9 was burdened by the lack of time to prepare herself;  
>Cologne was hampered by the child she carried. <br>  
>"Go now, Old Woman. Leave, and you might live for a while."<br>  
  
>That voice! Hotaru had never sounded like that in her whole life. It  
<br>was callous, uncaring... evil. "Who are you? What have you done to  
>Hotaru?"<br>  
>Mistress 9 laughed. These humans were such fun, they never expected the  
<br>truth until it was too late. "I am Mistress 9, leader of the Witches 5,  
>servant of Master Pharaoh 90. Go now. Take the child if you will, it is  
<br>of no consequence to me.  
>"And when you go, thank your great granddaughter for me. Without her  
<br>memory work, I would not have been able to take control for another  
>week, and even then the fight would have been long and difficult.

Thank <br>her and let her know that it was her efforts that have allowed us to  
>conquer your world so easily!"<br>  
>Cologne was about to attack again as Mistress 9 laughed. All she had to <br>do was remember that this was not really her friend. Even if the real  
>Ranma was in there somewhere, Cologne knew that Ranma would be willing <br>to make any sacrifice necessary to stop someone as deranged as Mistress  
>9. A slight movement held Cologne back, forcing her to look into the <br>entry of the Tomoe home. There was something in there, something larger  
>than human, and definitely unsafe to be around. If she had allowed <br>Mistress 9 to goad her into action, Cologne and Chibi-Usa would have  
>been easy pickings for a Daimon.<br>  
>There was really only one option. While she was carrying someone her <br>own size, there was no way that she could fight a Daimon. If it was  
>just her against the Daimon, she might have won. If it was just her <br>against Mistress 9 - in her current state - Cologne almost certainly  
>would have won. Now, burdened and facing both at once, Cologne took her <br>only option. She ran.  
><br>Even as she took her first steps down the road, fleeing the battle,  
>Cologne could hear the sounds of pursuit being ordered. No matter how <br>much it ate at her to run from a battle, Cologne knew that it was her  
>obligation to run. She needed to get the child to safety, and she <br>needed to find people capable of helping her fight. The Sailor Senshi  
>would be ideal, but she had no idea where she could find them.<br>  
>After running for five minutes, Cologne had not yet managed to lose the <br>Daimon pursuing her. Bounding over a small hedgerow, Cologne almost  
>knocked down the saviour that she had been hoping for. Lined up and <br>sprinting towards her was a group of five magical girls, each  
>resplendent in their glorious colours, each posing for battle as they <br>saw her clutching an unconscious girl.  
><br>Knowing that the Daimon was hot on her heels, Cologne did not bother  
>with explanations, she just kept running. Dodging past Sailor Moon, the <br>wizened elder carried her precious cargo past the confused girls and  
>continued down the street that they had just come from. Sailor Moon was <br>turning to chase the woman holding her daughter when the Daimon  
>sprinted through the group, knocking her aside as it passed.<br>  
>Five mouths hung open for a precious second as each of the Senshi tried <br>to evaluate what they had just seen. An old woman looking like she had  
>kidnapped Chibi-Usa was being pursued by a Daimon. Daimons and Senshi <br>were historic enemies, if one of them was willing to ignore the  
>potential for a surprise attack on the girls just so that it could <br>continue to chase the woman, it meant that it wanted her really

badly.

>Anything that a Daimon wanted that badly, the Senshi had to protect.<br>

>The thoughts clicked into place all at the same time and like a rainbow <br>wave the Senshi turned and gave chase. Bounding obstacles and circling

>buildings, the quintet followed, slowly making ground. Slowly that was, <br>until Venus' Love-Me-Chain snaked out and briefly entangled the Daimon.

>That was the turning point. Now it was just the five Sailor Senshi <br>against one Daimon. While the Daimon brought itself back to its feet,

>the girls skidded to a halt and prepared their attacks.<br>

>Even as they girls gathered their energies, the Daimon rose and charged <br>them, bellowing like the demented hell spawn that it was. Less than

>five meters from Sailor Moon, four potent streams of energy ripped into <br>it, momentarily halting its advance. Before it could regain its lost

>momentum, Sailor Moon raised her sceptre to the sky and began to <br>perform her attack.

><br>"MOON SCEPTRE ELIMINATION!"

><br>The golden beam plunged straight through the monster's torso while it

>towered over the short girl. Pouring energy into the evil beast, Sailor <br>Moon could feel it disintegrate even as it tried to lower it's arms to

>attack her. <br>

>Tired but satisfied, Sailor Moon looked up to the sound of clapping. It <br>was the old woman, she had turned back during their fight and watched

>from the side lines. Seeing the woman still holding Chibi-Usa, Moon <br>rushed over and pulled her daughter into her arms, holding the little

>girl tightly.<br>

>"Chibi-Usa! Chibi-Usa! Are you all right? Can you hear me?"<br>

>"She cannot hear you Child. She has had her Heart Crystal stolen."<br>

>With iron in her gaze, Moon looked at the seemingly decrepit woman. <br>Obviously she was much more than she seemed, because she had managed to

>carry Chibi-Usa for some distance and still out run the Daimon. "Do you <br>know what happened? Do you know where it is?"

><br>"I do, and I shall tell you everything you need to know, but first, we

>must get her somewhere safe that she can rest."<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>Mistress 9 walked along next to the man posing as her father as they <br>entered the school where he worked. While she had diligently worked on

>breaking Ranma's curse so that she could gain her own body, he had been <br>at work here. Everything had been prepared within the main tower of the

>school for a ceremony that would summon Master Pharaoh 90 from the dark <br>reaches in which he resided. As the sun passed overhead, they were

>ready to begin on the final stage of their plan. Soon, no-one on Earth <br>would be able to stop them.

><br>"You should feel proud, Ranma. It is due to you that we are able

to do

>this so easily and with such safety. Without a cursed individual like <br>yourself, I would have had to go through all sorts of difficulties

>possessing someone."<br>

>As Tomoe Souichi unlocked the doors and guided Mistress 9 inside, she <br>continued to lecture Ranma. He was beating mindlessly at his mental

>prison, but she knew he would be able to hear. <br>

>"I realise that you never spent enough time studying mind control <br>spells, but they are very useful. You might have noticed that the one I

>am using on you is very, very good. That's why I was so glad I could <br>find someone like you. You see, that spell will disappear completely in

>another two hours, but until then it will be completely impervious to <br>your escape attempts.

>"If I had used a normal person, I could have had endless troubles <br>because the old personality would be suppressed but still there. With

>you, I can just sever you completely."<br>

>Mistress 9 stopped in the middle of the large entry room. Once it had <br>been intended as a trophy hall of some sort, but now it would serve

>another purpose. It would be a garbage dump for the human waste that <br>Mistress 9 no longer needed.

><br>Silently Ranma screamed, but it was to no avail. Mistress 9 raised

>Chibi-Usa's Heart Crystal and placed it into her mouth, consuming the <br>power inside. Instantly, she could feel the extra energy flushing

>through her system. Power supreme, the power to break the curse and <br>free herself from the meddling idiot she had been forced to use.

><br>Focusing her magic, Mistress 9 went to work, cutting the last of the

>magical bonds between Tendo Ranma's body and the body known as Tomoe <br>Hotaru. Bright light covered Hotaru, growing and expanding. When the

>indistinguishable glowing form was almost roof height, it peaked and <br>began to recede. As the light died down, it could be seen that there

>were now two people where there used to be one. <br>

>After almost a minute of brightness, the magical labours of two years <br>were completed. For a short moment, two people stood there, Mistress 9

>and Ranma. Then, like a tree being felled, Ranma collapsed straight <br>onto his face to lie prone on the floor.

><br>Grinning evilly, Mistress 9 concentrated and forced herself to grow.

>Her clothes changed with her, to reveal a tall woman was a hard face in <br>a long, tight black dress. Mistress 9's hair - once short like Hotaru's

>- continued to grow, first reaching her hips, then on to the floor.<br>

>Giving the body on the floor a nudge with her foot, Mistress 9 indulged <br>in a short laugh. "You foolish, foolish boy."

><br>"What... What have you done to me?" Ranma's voice was weak, barely able

>to make the words loud enough to be heard.<br>  
>"Oh, dear me! Did I forget to mention that there would only be  
enough <br>magical energy for one body? I'm sorry, I'm sure I would  
have mentioned  
>that." Thick and heavy sarcasm dripped from her words like week old  
<br>custard. Still tormenting her ex-partner Mistress 9 brought her  
hands  
>together and looked at the far wall. "Moko Takabisha!" Nothing  
<br>happened.  
><br>"Hmm, that was a nice little magical attack. Never mind, I shall  
learn  
>how you did it soon enough." Soon, all that was left with Ranma was  
the <br>echo's of Mistress 9's laugh. While he lay there, too weak to  
move, she  
>had gone off to destroy the world.<br>  
>All Ranma could do was moan in response. A day ago, the world had  
been <br>his oyster. Now, everything was ashes. He had been played as  
easily as  
>an old piano; even the cure that all his hopes had been pinned on  
was <br>now revealed to be false.  
><br>All that he could be grateful for was the fact that Mistress 9  
seemed  
>to be as ignorant of the power of the human soul as most magic users  
<br>were. The power of Ki - the Moko Takabisha - had noting to do  
with  
>magic. In the same way, Ranma could have almost no Ki remaining, but  
he <br>could still cast all of his spells. Both were needed for a  
body to  
>survive, and all Ranma had at the moment was Ki. Without a source of  
<br>magical energy, his body would die just as surely as if Mistress  
9 had  
>torn out his Heart Crystal.<br>  
>Mistress 9 might have been right about him dying without magic, but  
she <br>had failed to realise just what he could do without it. Using  
the power  
>of Ki alone, he could animate his body for hours. He was dying,  
<br>certainly, but in the mean time, he would go up there and get  
Chibi-  
>Usa's Heart Crystal back, and send Mistress 9 back to whatever hell  
had <br>spawned her!  
><br>Just as soon as he could work up the energy to stand...  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Mars felt bad about leaving Sailor Moon with Chibi-Usa, but  
someone  
>needed to look after the girl, and someone needed to investigate the  
<br>Tomoe house. Four Senshi and one ancient Amazon arrayed  
themselves at  
>the front of the Tomoe home and looked on it with mild trepidation.  
<br>From Cologne's description, at least one Witch and her Daimon had  
been  
>here. Without Sailor Moon, that might be more than they could  
handle.<br>  
>'Might be' was not enough to stop the Sailor Senshi. With a nod from  
<br>Venus, the five women charged in through the open front door.  
Cologne  
>was still carrying her thermos, but she refused to explain what it  
was <br>for. All she asked was that if they encountered Hotaru,  
Cologne should  
>be allowed to try and engage her first. With that in mind, Cologne  
let <br>the Senshi check out the living room and basement, while

Cologne moved

>to the bedroom.<br>

>The bedroom was as empty as she feared. There were clothes on the  
<br>floor, and the bed looked slept in, but there were no signs of  
Hotaru

>and no signs of a struggle. Looking for clues, Cologne began going  
<br>through the clothing, starting with the pair of pants that were  
on the

>floor. Pants sized to fit Ranma.<br>

>There was nothing in there to indicate where Ranma was or what was  
<br>going on, but there was a small slip of paper. Squinting her old  
eyes

>slightly, Cologne read it, only to have her eyes go wide again with  
<br>surprise. Amazing, the Hino girl had actually asked Ranma out.

She

>wondered whether Ranma would accept. After all, he had apparently  
<br>rejected every other offer from Shampoo, Makoto and Ukyo.

><br>Slipping the note into the voluminous folds of her robe, she  
examined

>the rest of the room. Although she respected Ranma's right to choose  
<br>whomever he desired, there was no reason that she shouldn't help

>Shampoo, who was obviously the best choice. Besides, she  
rationalised, <br>if Hino Rei was keen enough, she would approach  
Ranma again and give

>him a reminder. Remembering what she had seen of Rei, that reminder  
<br>would probably be neither subtle nor gentle, increasing Shampoo's

>chances yet again.<br>

>Downstairs the Senshi were investigating the incriminating evidence  
in <br>Tomoe Souichi's lab. There were beakers, bunsen burners and  
all manner

>of other lab equipment. There were also piles and piles of lab  
books. <br>Whether or not Hotaru had known what was going on, her  
father had

>definitely been in it up to his eyebrows.<br>

>While Sailor Mercury sat down and tried to garner some clues from  
the <br>book, the remaining girls set about taking apart the building  
brick by

>brick, looking for clues. It was obvious that the woman called  
Mistress <br>9 was not here now, nor was the Daimon. That also meant  
that where ever

>they were, the Senshi could find Chibi-Usa's Heart Crystal there  
too. <br>Finding that Crystal was becoming increasingly important  
every second

>that passed. Without the Crystal, Chibi-Usa would die some time  
<br>tonight.

><br>When the clock ticked past two in the afternoon and no definite  
clues

>had been found, Cologne appraised Sailor Venus of a change in plans.  
<br>Still holding out the hope that Hotaru may have been able to  
regain

>proper control, Cologne wanted to search some of her friends old  
<br>haunts. If Hotaru (or Ranma) was to be found, Cologne knew she  
would

>find her.<br>

>The idea of working with a non-Senshi for long periods of time had  
not <br>sat well with Sailor Venus, so she did not object too greatly  
when



>Cologne left. She might be able to do things that most old women could <br>not, but Venus could not help shake the belief that she really was the  
>frail old lady she looked like. The sorts of enemies that the Senshi <br>would be facing would be a trial for even their great powers. A lady as  
>old and decrepit-looking as Cologne would simply be another target.<br>  
>Looking back on the building as she left, Cologne hoped that she would <br>be the first one to find Hotaru. If the Senshi found her first, there  
>was no telling what would happen. At least Cologne knew ways of <br>incapacitating someone, even a fighter as good as Hotaru could be  
  
>defeated with a little luck. Just as importantly as searching for <br>Hotaru, Cologne wanted to get back to the Nekohaten. Shampoo had been  
>alone all day, and Cologne was worried about her. Not just what might <br>happen if Hotaru returned there, but she was just as concerned about  
>how Shampoo would be feeling, as she would surely be wracked with guilt <br>over what happened to Ranma.  
><br>At around six in the evening, Sailor Jupiter hit the mother lode. Given  
>the quantity of material to search, each of the girls had grabbed a <br>handful of lab books and begun reading. Most of them had dealt with  
>strange chemical reactions, spells and complicated machinery. The book <br>Jupiter had just opened was different. It was a record that detailed  
>the acquisition and modification of the spell casting site: the main <br>tower at Mugen Academy. Hotaru's school.  
><br>Crowded around the revealing book, Venus hit her communicator. "Sailor  
>Moon? Tuxedo Kamen?"<br>  
>"Yes?"<br>  
>"We've found them! Mugen Academy, it's where Hotaru went to school. For <br>that matter, I think Tomoe Sensei worked there. That must have been how  
>he had access to be able to set up the place. We've got a map here. Do <br>you know where it is?"  
><br>"I do. Chibi-Usa used to like to meet Hotaru there some times. She... I  
>still can't believe that little Hotaru is completely bad!"<br>  
  
>"Neither do I Sailor Moon. Neither do I. Can you leave Chibi-Usa for a <br>while? We'll meet you out the front of the school."  
  
><br>"Right! Mamoru is going to stay here with her. I'll meet you there."  
><br>Twenty minutes later, five Senshi gathered at the base of Mugen  
  
>Academy's main tower. Behind them, the moon hung large and low in the <br>sky. It was a bright yellow, cast into a almost C shaped crescent,  
>languidly casting dim shadows of the girls that reached almost the <br>entire way to the tower. A light breeze stole through the group and  
>gently stirred their hair. <br>  
>It was a perfect night for fighting evil.<br>

>Just as the group started forwards, a small helicopter charged onto the <br>scene, momentarily distracting the girls from their objective. The

>Outer Senshi had arrived in their usual glorious manner. Even if they <br>had not been distracted, the Senshi would have not been able to prevent

>Mistress 9's masterful defence of her stronghold. <br>

>For every window and door in the tower, a thick red fluid began to pour <br>forth. Where it touched the ground, a Daimon instantly rose and charged

>at the defenders of love and justice. Not to be intimidated by these <br>weaker brethren of the mighty engines of evil they usually fought,

>Sailors Mercury, Venus, Mars and Jupiter began to lay down a withering <br>fire of magic.

><br>Fire, water, earth and lightning assaulted the Daimons, but the hordes

>continued to drive forward, closing in on the girls by weight of <br>numbers and dogged determination. When they were close enough for a

>telling effect, Sailor Moon cast her Moon Spiral Heart Attack, <br>banishing a small army forever. It was not enough, as instantly a new

>legion arose, closing in on the Senshi.<br>

>The Outer Senshi in the helicopter were not faring much better. By <br>being able to avoid the mindless hordes of dark minions that Mistress 9

>had at her command, the three Outers managed to attract Mistress 9's <br>personal attention. All it took was a few short bursts of dark energy

>from the tower and the Outer's helicopter was a burning wreck, rapidly <br>approaching the ground in a crash that would surely kill them all.

><br>Even as Sailor Neptune was bracing herself against the back of the

>pilot's seat and preparing for death, everything went quiet. Raising <br>her head, Neptune looked around. Surprise turned to bafflement as she

>saw the frozen flames that had once been licking at the laminated <br>plastic of her window. "What?... How?..."

><br>Sailor Pluto answered with a slightly strained voice that echoed

>strangely. "This is my most forbidden technique: the ability to stop <br>time. For a short while, the three of us will be immune to the effects

>of time. Come, we must escape before this vehicle carries us to our <br>deaths."

><br>Confused, but not questioning their good luck and powerful ally,

>Neptune and Uranus joined hands with Pluto and teleported to the roof. <br>The Inner Senshi needed all five to be present for a teleport, the

>Outers could perform the same with only three, or even two. From the <br>roof they would be able to gain access.

><br>Looking up at the helicopter, the girls covered their eyes as time

>resumed and their unfortunate transport exploded in a blaze of glory. <br>While they forced access to the building, Pluto steadfastly ignored the

>other girls' questions on what had just happened. Why was the

technique <br>forbidden? Who had forbidden it? And what would happen to her for using

>it?<br>

>Their actions had not gone unnoticed by others. Inside the tower, an <br>exhausted Ranma had almost climbed the stairwell to the top floor when

>he felt the slight impact on the timeline. Despite his tiredness, his <br>lips curled back in a snarl and he forced himself onwards.

\_She\_ was

>here. His other nemesis. The evil witch Meiou Setsuna. Not only did she <br>have access to the Gates Of Time, she most assuredly seemed willing to

>abuse those powers. Concentrating on placing one foot in front of the <br>other, Ranma wondered which was the bigger threat to the human race.

>Mistress 9 who wanted to conquer it, or Setsuna who would almost <br>certainly destroy it one day by accident.

><br>"They stopped time and teleported in. The Outer Planet Soldiers

>certainly are different." Inside the building, Mistress 9 was mildly <br>impressed.

><br>"Nonetheless, your power is truly great, Messiah of Silence."

Tomoe

>said as he complemented his Mistress' power. She simply nodded and idly <br>brushed her enormously long hair back.

><br>"True as that might be, I will still need the Grail to be able to

>activate the machine you have spent so much time preparing. When Eudial <br>found the three Talismans for us, she failed in the most important

>task. The three Talismans summon the Holy Grail, a source of almost <br>unlimited magical power. Now our enemy has it in her possession."

><br>Tomoe looked worried. "Sailor Moon? But... will even you be able to

>defeat her? She is supposed to be exceptionally powerful."<br>

>Mistress 9 smiled condescendingly and chuckled. Shedding height and <br>years, Mistress 9 shrunk back into her original form of Hotaru.

>Clenching her fists beneath her chin, Hotaru looked up at the man who <br>was her father. She looked quite incredibly cute and vulnerable.

>"Perhaps if I ask her nicely..."<br>

>The laugh that followed was anything but childish and nice. "Now, you <br>go and deal with those three intruders. Use whatever means you need."

><br>Souichi laughed as he had never done before. With a series of strange

>cracking noises, the once human form of Hotaru's father was enlarged <br>and warped beyond normal comprehension. Daimon Germatos looked at his

>mistress and smiled. Tomoe Souichi had been an intelligent and valuable <br>pawn in his time. The Daimon that they had implanted in him had simply

>been a safety precaution, but now that the man was no longer needed... <br>

>Despite the damage that had been done to his mind by the long exposure <br>to the evil, magic and mysterious concoctions kept within his house, a

>small part of Souichi's mind had remained human enough to wonder at  
<br>what he was doing. Only the overriding thought of helping his daughter

>had kept him close to sane and functional. Now even that was gone, and  
<br>it was a blessing, for the man who had once been Tomoe Souichi would

>have been terrified at what he intended to do to the Outer Senshi.<br>

>Mistress 9 watched her last servant depart and smiled happily. Now all  
<br>she needed was the Grail. Reaching out a hand, she pushed at the air in

>front of her, causing ripples to appear as though a rock had been  
<br>dropped into a pond. A little more force, and her hand simply

>disappeared, slicing through this point in space to appear elsewhere.<br>

>It was the third time that Sailor Moon had used the Moon Spiral Heart  
<br>Attack. Each time she cleared a cluster of Daimons, but each time the

>army reformed and advanced on them again. Each of the Inner Senshi was  
<br>waging their own inner battle as well as the battle against the

>Daimons. Long minutes of pitched battle was having a telling effect on  
<br>their strengths. Most times that they fought, they faced only one or

>two enemies. All they needed was a few attacks and their Princess was  
<br>able to bring them home to victory.

><br>This battle was different. This time there seemed to be no end to the

>opponents. No matter how many of the hideous, deformed creatures they  
<br>killed, two appeared for each one killed. Each Sailor felt like she had

>banished more evil tonight than any other night in their life, but  
<br>still the forces of darkness continued to break upon them like some sea

>of evil. A sea that threatened to drown them all should any one person  
<br>falter.

><br>It was into this thunderous, crashing maelstrom that Mistress 9's hand

>appeared. Sailor Moon was behind her friends, recuperating and  
<br>preparing for another attack. There had to be a limit to these Daimons

>eventually. As soon as their opponents slacked off enough to give the  
<br>Sailors some time, they would be able to do a Sailor Teleport and enter

>the tower without having to fight all of the Daimons arrayed against  
<br>them. They would have been able to do this if all five had been

>present, but Mistress 9 had other plans. <br>

>Guided by unseen eyes, Mistress 9 unerringly found Sailor Moon's throat  
<br>and gripped it hard. With a strong pull Mistress 9 began to haul the

>sailor suited defender of love and justice through the portal she had  
<br>created. It was not until Sailor Moon had been dragged through up to

>her waist that any of her friends actually saw what was happening.<br>

>"Sailor Moon!" Mars yelled, as she tried to disengage and help her  
<br>friend. It was only moments too late that she reached the spot where

>her leader had been. Fingertips brushing against the sole of one red  
<br>boot, Sailor Mars watched as Sailor Moon vanished into a small  
ripple  
>in the air.<br>  
>"Nooooo!" Turning back to the Daimons, Sailor Mars unleashed her fire  
<br>with redoubled vigour. Daimons fell like wheat before a thresher,  
but  
>it was still not enough.<br>  
>Withdrawing slightly, the girls relieved some of the pressure by the  
<br>Daimons. "We can't teleport without Sailor Moon!"  
><br>Jupiter nodded. "Right! But we have to trust Sailor Moon. She'll  
do  
>what's right, and we'll be able to help her as soon as we get  
through <br>these things."  
><br>"Yeah, besides, we have to stop them spreading throughout the  
city!  
>Don't worry, Sailor Moon. We'll be with you soon, and the Outers are  
in <br>there somewhere to help you too."  
><br>With a grim nod, the four remaining inner planet Senshi formed  
up into  
>a line again and charged. Magic crackled around them as they ran,  
<br>tearing into the Daimons. Against the quantity they faced, even  
this  
>charge failed to see them through, forcing them to resort to the  
same <br>magic attacks that they had been for so long now. The  
entrance to the  
>tower seemed a long, long way ahead.<br>  
>Blinking slowly, Sailor Moon pushed the hair back from her eyes.  
<br>"Where?... That's right! Someone grabbed me, it must have been  
Mistress  
>9!"<br>  
>Coughing a couple of times as she sat up, Sailor Moon looked around.  
<br>She must have been strangled unconscious when she was pulled  
through,  
>that would explain why her throat was so sore. Her uniform, already  
<br>showing small tears from the battle they had been waging looked  
no  
>better for her lying on the floor.<br>  
>Once she had regained her feet, Sailor Moon took a careful stock of  
the <br>area. It took only a few moments to recognise little Hotaru  
lying  
>unconscious only a few feet away from her. Running over to the girl,  
<br>Sailor Moon knelt at her side and tried to wake her up by  
patting her  
>hand and shaking her lightly.<br>  
>Slowly and weakly Hotaru opened her eyes, and Sailor Moon almost  
wept <br>with the look of hope that she saw there. "It's OK,  
Hotaru-chan. We'll  
>get you out of here."<br>  
>Holding on to the older girl, Hotaru's voice shook with emotion.  
"You <br>have to help me. She's inside my head. I can feel her. She  
want's to do  
>bad things."<br>  
>Getting to her feet, Sailor Moon took Hotaru's hand and led her to  
the <br>exit. "Don't worry. You'll be OK. We'll all help you."

><br>"I... I heard her say that the only thing that can stop her is  
the Holy  
>Grail. If.. If I had that..."<br>  
>Sailor Moon looked indecisive. She had been entrusted with the Grail

to  
guard it. She knew she was not supposed to give it out. But this might  
be Hotaru's only chance... Slowly she brought out the Grail. She felt  
so uncertain.  
That uncertainty was brought to a shattering halt as Sailors Neptune  
and Uranus appeared in one of the doorways. "Don't do it Sailor Moon!  
She's evil! Get away from her, we have to kill her!"

Moon was shocked! She knew the Outer Senshi were willing to be extreme,  
but this was going too far even for them. When she saw Neptune cast her  
Deep Submerge and Uranus cast World Shaking, she reacted purely on  
instinct. Any ordinary little girl would have been killed instantly by  
those attacks. If there was even the slightest chance that the Outs  
could be wrong and Hotaru could be saved, Sailor Moon knew she could  
not take that chance.  
Leaping in front of Hotaru might not have been the smartest thing that  
Sailor Moon ever did, but even as she was blasted across the room by  
the power of the girls who were supposed to be her allies, she knew it  
was the right thing to do. "I can't let you kill her. Sacrifices do not  
always have to be made."  
Slowly, tentatively - and to the sound of the Outs screamed

objections - Sailor Moon held out the Holy Grail. With a look of  
nervous expectation, Hotaru reached out and took the Grail into her  
small hands. Her normally sombre face went from a tentative smile, to a  
grin, to a laugh of startling passion and volume.  
All around them, people were still yelling 'no' in a futile attempt to  
make Moon take back the Grail, but it was too late. Turning her back on  
Sailor Moon, Hotaru immediately walked the few steps that were needed  
to place her in front of the machinery adorning the entire wall of the  
room. Machinery filled with strange images of swirling galaxies and  
brilliant stars. Every step she took, Hotaru gained stature and age. By  
the time she had reached a small alcove in the wall, she was at her  
full height, recognisable as the mature form that Mistress 9 had used  
before.  
Placing the Grail in the wall Mistress 9 raised her hands and addressed  
them. "I am Mistress 9, servant to the mighty Master Pharaoh 90, Lord  
of the Darkness. With this beacon that we have activated, Master  
Pharaoh 90 can find your pitiful planet and he will bring the Silence.  
Everything will be destroyed as he brings darkness over your world. The  
truth of darkness shall reign where once the lies of light existed.  
Look! He comes! He comes!"  
A dark swirling blackness had begun to form next to her, and all

everyone could do was watch stunned. Powerful blots of black lightning  
repeatedly launched from the vortex, smashing anything

in the room that  
>they touched. Unbelievably, Mistress 9 seemed to have won. Then,  
just <br>as the Senshi present were about to try a charge against the  
very heart  
>of darkness, a voice from behind cried out against Mistress 9's  
<br>actions, drawing all eyes.  
><br>Saturn Knight stood in the doorway, using the Silence Glaive as  
a  
>crutch to keep himself erect. Almost at the top of the stairs,  
<br>something had told Ranma to transform into Saturn Knight. He did  
not  
>know where he got the power to, but now that he was here, he could  
<br>finally stop what his blindness had allowed to happen. "No! You  
may not  
>do this! I forbid you to use that body for your evil purposes! I  
will <br>stop you, no matter what it takes!"  
><br>His face was drawn and haggard, and he walked with all the speed  
of an  
>old man with rheumatism, but he seemed to be able to walk through  
the <br>inferno of darkness without fear. Even when Mistress 9 turned  
on him  
>and launched bolt after bolt of magic into him, all it did was  
<br>strengthen him.  
><br>"No! You can't be alive! You're dead! I killed you. Damn it! Why  
won't  
>you stay dead?"<br>  
>Reaching out with the last of his energy, Ranma touched Mistress 9.  
It <br>was only a light touch, but with all his substantial will  
behind it,  
>Ranma wished he could undo what he had done.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Ranma stood in a plane of greyness. It was grey everywhere. Not  
white, <br>not black, just a shade of unidentifiable, unlimited grey.  
There was no  
>up, no down, no front, no back. Just grey. All grey but for the one  
<br>point of darkness. A shape of blackness in the field of grey.  
Across  
>the field of grey came a vertical ellipse of pure blackness, and as  
it <br>drew nearer he could feel its evil.  
><br>"So this is the true form of Mistress 9."  
><br>The darkness laughed. "Foolish mortal. You have entered my realm  
now.  
>This is the realm of the mind, where only spirits may exist. The  
<br>connection of the curse may have allowed you to rejoin and force  
this  
>meeting, but do not think you can win. I am Mistress 9, and I have  
<br>brought darkness to the realm of spirits for longer than you can  
  
>possibly imagine. There is nothing that you can do that can possibly  
<br>stop me."  
><br>Ranma rallied against that. "I am Tendo Ranma, master of the  
Anything  
>Goes School Of Martial Arts. I have trained under the greatest  
masters <br>of magic, spiritualism and martial arts in the world.  
There is nothing  
>I cannot defeat!"<br>  
>The blackness laughed. It had the same voice that Mistress 9 had  
when <br>she talked to him in his head. How he had ever mistaken her  
for a  
>friend, he could not understand. "You want to know the true power of

<br>darkness? Try this!"

><br>A tendril of the purest black shot out of Mistress 9. Where her edges

>were blurred and indistinct, this was a clean line of evil cutting  
<br>across the neutral grey of the indefinite landscape. Catching him

>unready, the blackness struck him fairly in the chest, sending him  
<br>sailing backwards. Although it was only the one attack, lights danced

>at the edge of his vision while pain rippled up and down his torso. It <br>was pain like he had never experienced before.

><br>Feeling as though he was on fire while someone was trying to unstitch

>his body at the very core of its existence, Ranma reclaimed his feet in <br>time to mostly avoid the next attack. Black fire running up his calf

>forced him to keep rolling as he dodged more attacks. No matter how he <br>tried to move, the evil blackness of Mistress 9 followed him, seeming

>to be able to move without care in any direction.<br>

>It was when he saw Mistress 9 moving down through what he had thought <br>of as the ground that he realised that the normal rules of combat did

>not apply here... wherever here was. Before she could strike again, <br>Ranma leapt. There was nothing to leap from, his mind kept telling him,

>but he did leap. All it took was the right perspective, and Ranma was <br>able to move around. No matter where he was, he was in reach of

>something to grab or jump from, but if he wanted it, the space was as <br>clear as air. And aerial combat was his speciality.

><br>Seeing that her opponent was not the easy target she had first though,

>Mistress 9 increased her attacks in every way possible. They were <br>faster, larger and more dangerous. But now she was not the only one

>fighting. The first time Ranma brought his hands together and screamed <br>Moko Takabisha, Mistress 9 did not even deign to dodge. Blithely

>relying on the knowledge that magic would not work in a spiritual <br>battle for the dominion of their body, Mistress 9 had anticipated Ranma

>would be making himself into a stationary target.<br>

>Ranma's projectile of radiant, glowing blue Ki slammed into her with <br>the force of a freight train, scattering small particles of darkness

>into the grey void. Slowly these evaporated and it was a slightly <br>smaller and much wiser Mistress 9 that faced him now.

><br>"So, you are not as defenceless as I would have expected. It will make

>it even more pleasurable for me to consign your soul to darkness when I <br>finally defeat you. No-one has dared to hurt me like that in all the

>centuries I have lived!"<br>

>This time a web of darkness erupted from Mistress 9, cascading directly <br>at Ranma. Two glowing balls of Ki broke the centre and let him through,

>but even the light touch from the edge fragments numbed his left arm <br>with pain. Flipping and rolling over Mistress 9, Ranma unleashed



a beam  
>of Ki that only narrowly missed his adversary.<br>  
>Time seemed to have no meaning in their fight as the two masters of  
<br>spiritual combat fought each other. It may have been hours or it  
may  
>have been days. In the grey nothingness of the mind, there was not  
<br>concept of time. No way to tell what was occurring in the real  
world.  
>After an eternity of fighting, Ranma and Mistress 9 separated and  
<br>circled each other warily. Both were injured, but both fought on,  
for  
>to lose this battle was to lose their life.<br>  
>Mistress 9's voice echoed out from the void, taunting him. "I shall  
so <br>look forward to playing with your little friends once we  
finish here.  
>Master Pharaoh 90 will join us soon, and when he does, darkness  
shall <br>reign supreme. He shall bring the Silence, and everyone on  
your world  
>shall perish. But just for you, I shall save some of your friends...  
<br>Their deaths shall be particularly long and painful."

><br>"He... He hasn't come yet?"  
><br>Ranma could swear that he could see Mistress 9 start in  
surprise, but  
>how an indistinct ellipse of blackness does that, he could not  
<br>describe. "You did not know? You would fight all this time and  
you did  
>not know? Our time here is barely an instant. When I have slain you,  
I <br>will be able to watch all your friends suffering, without  
losing a  
>single precious minute of it."<br>  
>Master Pharaoh 90 had not yet arrived? There was no rush to defeat  
<br>Mistress 9 then. He could take his time and be careful. Ranma  
knew that  
>he might take a few hits along the way, but there was no way that he  
<br>would be defeated now. Winning was what he did best.  
><br>He was about to launch another attack at Mistress 9 when he felt  
a  
>third presence. It was weak and indistinct, but he felt it.  
Chibi-Usa's <br>voice rang out from the void, reminding the both that  
Mistress 9 had  
>gained much of her power from Chibi-Usa's Heart Crystal. "We fight  
for <br>love and justice, and that is something you can never  
defeat."  
><br>The voice faded away after a moment, but it had served its  
purpose.  
>Mistress 9 was distracted, and Ranma was fuelled with new purpose  
and <br>determination. It was the work of but a moment to build it,  
but the Ki  
>ball that he finally released was almost as tall as he was. Soaring  
<br>towards Mistress 9, she was almost too late noticing it.

><br>Dodging by the slimmest margins, the blackness of Mistress 9  
curved  
>above the huge ball of Ki, narrowly avoiding being fried instantly.  
<br>With a feeling of glee, Mistress 9 concentrated on Ranma and  
returned  
>the attack. When the Ki ball failed to sail harmlessly into the  
<br>infinite depths but instead exploded just behind her, Mistress 9  
was

>caught completely unaware.<br>  
>Disoriented, disrupted and crippled by the all consuming pain of the  
<br>blast, Mistress 9 was completely unaware of Ranma running closer  
to  
>her. When she was finally able to comprehend again, Ranma was  
already <br>cupping his hands and pouring energy into them. Before  
she was able to  
>pull herself together and form any sort of credible defence, Ranma's  
<br>light was burning her darkness from every corner of their  
universe.  
><br>Wherever there was darkness, Ranma directed the light. Wherever  
there  
>was hatred, he brought compassion. Where there was pain he brought  
<br>restitution. With a last agonised scream, Mistress 9 passed from  
the  
>world of the living.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Sailor Moon watched as Saturn Knight touched Mistress 9 and then  
seemed <br>to fall into her. With a slow motion effect he literally  
seemed to  
>dissolve into the tall woman. While he moved, the bodies became  
covered <br>in a swirling, boiling patina of dark and light. For a  
precious second,  
>light and dark fought seeking dominance. In the end, light was  
<br>ascendant, completely covering Mistress 9's form in a brilliant  
glow.  
><br>The eye searing glow held for only a instant, but it was enough  
to  
>cause everyone to shield their eyes as the light seemed to explode  
out <br>from Mistress 9. Squinting her eyes, Moon interposed her hand  
to try  
>and block the light. She could just make out a shape past her hand,  
and <br>it was the shape of a young girl in a short skirt with a  
large bow on  
>her chest holding something very tall. The girl smiled once and  
<br>vanished, the light vanishing with her.  
><br>Looking around for a startled moment, it took the Senshi's eyes  
a while  
>to readjust to the darkness. To her horror, Sailor Moon saw that the  
<br>dark portal was still growing. Deep inside it, Moon could dimly  
see a  
>darker shape moving. It was approaching. Still distant, she knew  
that <br>it would not take long before Master Pharaoh 90 would  
arrive. If  
>Mistress 9 and her servants had been so powerful, how could they  
hope <br>to stand against someone even she considered all powerful?

><br>Standing in the corner, Neptune and Uranus had been joined by  
the third  
>Outer Senshi. Pluto had seen all that had gone before and now looked  
at <br>her compatriots. Clearly they would gain no support in what  
must be  
>done from Sailor Moon.<br>  
>"That person we just saw was Sailor Saturn, the Senshi of creation  
and <br>destruction. Her mind had been polluted by both Mistress 9  
and Saturn  
>Knight. I do not know where she is now, but I am sure she will  
return. <br>When she does, we must be ready for her."  
><br>Watching her two allies nod, Pluto continued. "Sailor Saturn has  
the

>power to destroy the world. In every sense she presents just as real  
a <br>danger as Master Pharaoh 90. If Sailor Moon can block his  
arrival, we  
>will be able to deal with Sailor Saturn. There is no way that she  
can <br>be allowed to live as she currently is, she simply presents  
too great a  
>risk."<br>  
>Watching Sailor Moon prepare to engage the vortex, the three Outers  
<br>readied themselves. It was not a nice mission, but they were the  
  
>world's only defence against Sailor Saturn. Better that they  
tarnished <br>themselves forever by a cowardly attack than risk  
letting her live and  
>destroy the world with her hate filled mind that had been corrupted  
by <br>evil Mistress 9 and the psychotic Saturn Knight.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Chiba Mamoru sat next to Chibi-Usa's bed in the Tsukino home.  
  
>Throughout the day she had been getting weaker and paler. Now she  
<br>seemed as fragile as glass, and even the simple effort of  
breathing  
>seemed to be a strain. Unless the Senshi succeeded and returned with  
<br>her Heart Crystal, his daughter was doomed.  
><br>Once again tears threatened at his eyes when he thought of the  
  
>injustice of everything. Chibi-Usa had come back in time to them so  
<br>that she could train with Sailor Moon and learn to be the new  
Moon  
>Senshi when she returned to her own time in Crystal Tokyo. Instead,  
his <br>precious daughter had been set upon by the evil that the  
Senshi were  
>fighting and would now lose her life. Where was the reason and  
justice <br>in that?  
><br>The brilliant flare of light announced a Sailor Senshi  
teleporting in,  
>but when his eyes found the girl, it was not one that he recognised.  
<br>She was shorter than any of the girls that he knew, and younger  
too.  
>She was dressed much as any Senshi was, with a short blue skirt,  
white <br>bodysuit, gloves and a large black bow proudly displayed on  
her chest.  
>The style of dress may have been similar, but the colours were  
<br>different from any he had known. Equally, rather than the small,  
round  
>jewel in the middle of her bow, she sported a large spiked gem, like  
a <br>gleaming star.  
><br>Strangest of all was the long silver staff that towered over  
her. It's  
>pair of long wicked blades glinted in the room's light, drawing all  
<br>eyes to them. Only as he looked at the weapon did realisation  
began to  
>pierce his brain. "You..."<br>  
>"Standing in place of the silent world Saturn, I am the destruction  
and <br>creation Senshi, Sailor Saturn!"  
><br>Mamoru's knees shook. He knew what Pluto had told them about  
Sailor  
>Saturn, and none of that inspired confidence in her. Then she took  
her <br>eyes from him and looked at the form lying in the bed. The  
instant she  
>took in Chibi-Usa's small, still body, her expression softened and

she <br>gave a small smile. Raising her left hand, she produced a pink,  
>multifaceted star: Chibi-Usa's Heart Crystal. <br>  
>Walking to stand next to the girl, Sailor Saturn gently returned the  
<br>crystal to her chest. Looking up at Mamoru, she gave him a reassuring  
>smile as Chibi-Usa's breathing strengthened and colour began to return <br>to her cheeks.  
><br>"She will survive and be strong."  
><br>"How... How did you get it?"  
><br>Sailor Saturn sighed and looked away for a moment. "An evil woman  
>called Mistress 9 possessed my mind and body. While she did this, she <br>attacked my friend and took her Heart Crystal. It was in my darkest  
>hour that I heard Chibi-Usa call to me. She said that we fight for love <br>and justice and I realised that she was right.  
>"Without Chibi-Usa, I may have lost that battle, and Mistress 9 would <br>have been free on this world. Chibi-Usa was the only person who could  
>possibly have reached me like that. Because of her, I have become <br>Sailor Saturn, I have remembered who I am and what my true powers are."  
><br>Mamoru looked up in awe. "Because of her..."  
><br>Sailor Saturn nodded once and gently brushed Chibi-Usa's head. "Because  
>of her I know what I must do."<br>  
>Watching Sailor Saturn teleport away with the same ease she arrived, <br>Mamoru marvelled at what he had heard. If not for his daughter, Sailor  
>Saturn may never have survived to come into the world. Without her, he <br>knew that the Senshi would be in dire straits against their current  
>enemy. Hopefully her power would make the difference they needed.<br>  
>Looking down at his daughter who was now sleeping normally, Mamoru <br>shook his head. "You sent her here for training, Sailor Pluto? The one  
>girl that happened to make all the difference in the end? Sailor Pluto, <br>you and I shall have a very long talk some day about how to treat my  
>family..."<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>As Sailor Saturn talked to Mamoru, she marvelled at how clear and <br>simple everything seemed now. Her change into Sailor Saturn had freed  
>her mind. Now she could remember her past, and just what life had <br>really been like.  
><br>All of the dreams that she had been suffering from now longer seemed  
>like nightmares, they were memories that had been dredged up.  
<br>Recollections of a time long in the past when she was Sailor Saturn all  
>the time. But it was not just Sailor Saturn, for she remembered being <br>Saturn Knight. At the same time, she could remember being both people,  
>she also knew that she was both people at the moment. <br>  
>When Queen Serenity had used her magic to pull Sailor Saturn's soul far <br>into the future, Sailor Saturn had pulled along her husband's soul.

>Their marriage and love had been more important to them than the  
<br>possibility of a new life. For the life of one without the other  
did  
>not bear thinking about. Using all of her skill and power, Sailor  
<br>Saturn had tried to take her husband with her so that he too  
could be  
>reincarnated. <br>  
>Unfortunately, other than in battle magic, Sailor Saturn was nowhere  
<br>near equal to Queen Serenity. Her control of the spell was poor,  
and  
>her strength was weak. Rather than taking her soul to a time in the  
<br>future when all the Senshi would awaken within a year of each  
other,  
>Sailor Saturn had dropped both of them hundreds of years too early.  
The <br>very mechanism that she had used to bring Saturn Knight with  
her was  
>already fundamentally flawed. Bonding his soul to hers so she could  
act <br>as a guide was a brilliant idea for someone untrained in  
those arts,  
>but Serenity could have identified the problems immediately.<br>

>Sailor Saturn and Saturn Knight had reincarnated into the same body.  
<br>Their long travel through time and the years of life as Ranma had  
fused  
>their souls. Personalities merged and memories mixed. The two lovers  
no <br>longer existed as separate entities. It seemed only destiny  
that had  
>allowed Ranma to fall into that cursed spring all those years ago,  
but <br>even that could have been some manifestation of the magic  
that had  
>brought them together.<br>  
>Although she did not realise it, Sailor Saturn's and Saturn Knight's  
<br>memories were as fragmented the rest of the Senshi after their

>reincarnation. It was these holes in their recollection that caused  
the <br>strange dreams and the almost split personality. Now that  
Sailor Saturn  
>had awoken, she could feel the mental healing going on. The presence  
of <br>two souls was giving her a memory of herself that continued to  
expand.  
>Given time, she knew that she would remember all the details that  
she <br>needed of her previous life.  
><br>Now, however, she was Tendo Ranma, temporarily in the guise of  
Sailor  
>Saturn. Sailor Saturn had a destiny to fulfil and a world to save.  
<br>Neither of those would be completed by themselves, and she was  
the only  
>one with the power to stop Master Pharaoh 90. Already her memories  
had <br>filled in the blanks on how to access her most powerful  
attacks. With  
>an ease that surprised herself, Sailor Saturn teleported back into  
the <br>main tower of Mugen Academy. The future was hers to defend,  
and it was  
>her responsibility to fix the damage that she had done.<br>  
>Her return was quite prompt from the perspective of the people  
<br>occupying the room where Master Pharaoh 90 had been summoned.  
Saturn  
>had not spent much time talking to Mamoru, so she was able to take  
<br>advantage of her position and reclaim the Grail for safe keeping.  
The

>black lightning was continuing to stream from the open portal to Master <br>Pharaoh 90, but Sailor Saturn was able to dodge these for the short  
>distance it took for her to be able to return it to Queen Serenity.<br>  
>Smiling fondly down at the young queen, Sailor Saturn could more  
<br>clearly remember the help the girl's mother had given her when she was  
>Saturn Knight back in the Moon Kingdom. She knew in the heart of her  
<br>being that she would be able to trust Queen Serenity with the power  
>that the Grail presented. The fact that she had mistakenly given it to  
<br>Mistress 9 meant that she was not perfect and might make mistakes, but  
>it also showed that she had the compassion and the love to never use  
<br>the Grail for evil. That was enough of an endorsement for Sailor Saturn  
>to relinquish the powerful magical item into her young hands.<br>

>Kneeling down next to her beaten looking queen, Sailor Saturn held out  
<br>the Grail with both hands. Her queen looked somewhat surprised, but she  
>tentatively reached took the Grail. With Queen Serenity lying on the  
<br>stairs leading up to the platform Sailor Saturn was on, she was looking  
>up into the eyes of her newest Senshi. Sailor Saturn's eyes were as  
<br>hard as flint, a deep purple colour with none of the laughing humour  
>that Hotaru usually possessed. A look passed between the two of them,  
<br>and they both knew that Sailor Saturn was planning on doing something  
>very brave and very foolish, but probably also very necessary.<br>

>Unfortunately, Sailor Saturn's position also placed her in an entirely  
<br>open setting. From where the Outer Senshi stood, Sailor Moon obscured  
>only the smallest area of their target. Resolving that this would be  
<br>their best chance to catch their adversary unawares, the three women  
>powered up and attacked, launching their attacks at the smallest,  
<br>newest and most dangerous Senshi.  
><br>Warned by instincts honed by hundreds of years of fighting, Sailor  
>Saturn was launching herself into the air before she was even aware of  
<br>moving. Looking downwards, she saw three coloured streams of energy  
>sail past underneath her and detonate against the floor where she had  
<br>been standing. Tucking into a roll, Sailor Saturn was completely  
>unharmd by the missed attacks, even using the explosion to propel her  
<br>in the direction of the three women that had made her life hell for so  
>long now. It was time to end this permanently. <br>  
>Dropping to her feet in front of the women, a quick smile crossed  
<br>Sailor Saturn's lips. The persona of Tomoe Hotaru that she had worn for  
>so many months now was weak and sickly; hardly capable of running  
<br>distances, let alone fighting. That was about as far from the truth as  
>possible for Ranma's girl form as it was possible to be. Now that

she <br>was empowered by the magic associated with being Sailor Saturn, she  
>took speed and power to whole new levels. <br>  
>Obvious from the way that they were standing, both Meiou Setsuna and  
<br>Tenou Haruka were experienced fighters, while Kaiou Michiru  
relied  
>primarily on her enhanced speed and magical capabilities. Three to  
one <br>against Sailor Saturn - a twelve year old girl - it was a  
long, long  
>way from an equal fight.<br>  
>Moving forward to striking distance, Sailor Saturn concentrated on  
<br>Haruka and Michiru first. Not only were they the least threats,  
she  
>also had special plans for Setsuna. Plans that did not include the  
<br>older woman ever seeing another sunrise.  
><br>Using the Silence Glaive like a quarter staff, Saturn knocked  
Michiru's  
>legs from underneath her. A slight flick with the end of the weapon  
had <br>the woman's feet moving up to parallel with her head.  
Spinning the  
>eight foot staff around her as though it was a cheer leader's baton,  
<br>Sailor Saturn vaulted the falling body of the girl in the green  
skirt.  
>Pushing herself off from the falling body with her free hand, Saturn  
<br>sent Michiru rocketing to the floor as she flew feet first at  
Haruka.  
><br>Stunned by the speed that the little girl had moved, Haruka was  
still  
>bring up her defences as a leg went either side of her torso. With a  
<br>sharp, scissoring motion, Sailor Saturn buckled Haruka's knees  
from  
>behind and rolled her own body almost two complete revolutions.  
<br>Although her mass was considerably smaller than the big girl's,  
her  
>movements flipped Haruka into a wall, sending cracks radiating out  
from <br>her head.  
><br>Catching herself with one hand, Sailor Saturn popped herself  
back to  
>her feet and stood in front of Meiou Setsuna. Behind her she heard  
the <br>sound of two bodies bounding on the floor. She knew they were  
not dead  
>yet, it would take considerably more than that to do them in. By her  
<br>reckoning, they should be stunned for the precious seconds she  
needed  
>to eliminate the one person with access to the Gates Of Time.<br>  
  
>For a long moment, two powerful Senshi faced each other with death  
in <br>their eyes. Both believed that the other person was the  
greatest threat  
>that their world faced, neither of them shifting an inch in their  
<br>perceptions. Acting on some hidden signal both moved in the same  
  
>instant.<br>  
>Bringing up the Time Staff, Sailor Pluto started her Dead Scream. It  
<br>was the same attack that she had used to kill Takuhi, and she  
would now  
>use it to destroy Sailor Saturn. The girl would probably be able to  
<br>survive the first blast, but once Sailors Neptune and Uranus were  
back  
>on their feet, she was confident that they would prevail.<br>

>Slashing down with the massive weapon in both hands, Sailor Saturn  
<br>called out the final attack of the Kotetsu Sen Ha, or Thousand  
Blade  
>Steel, one of Ranma's own extensions to the Umi Sen Ken and Yama Sen  
<br>Ken . "CHERRY BLOSSOM IN SUNBEAM!"  
><br>Perfected over hundreds of years of training, it was aimed at  
creating  
>an irresistible attack against a human sized target. Lunging the  
<br>Silence Glaive in an intricate pattern against Setsuna, the  
bladed tip  
>was reduced to nothing more than a flash of silver every time the  
<br>weapon stopped to reverse it's stroke. To an outside observer,  
the form  
>of Sailor Pluto would seem to have been covered in a column of  
<br>shinning, moving silver: the sunbeam of the attack.  
><br>The cherry blossom became apparent almost instantly that the  
attack  
>began. The cherry blossoms where Ranma had grown up were a gentle  
pink <br>in colour and you would often see them floating gently to  
the ground as  
>a wind blew. Small, bright flashes of red began appearing in the  
<br>sunbeam of Saturn's attack. On the floor, small spots of blood  
began to  
>appear, gently floating down through the light of the blade's  
constant <br>movement.  
><br>Even as Sailor Moon was calling out for them to stop fighting,  
the pair  
>separated. Sailor Saturn exploded backwards from her opponent,  
<br>propelled by the power of the Dead Scream. The one thing that the  
  
>attack had never been designed to counter was magic. If Setsuna had  
<br>attempted to flee or fight her off with her staff, Setsuna would  
have  
>died. As it was, the Guardian Of Time sagging on one knee, a vast  
<br>multitude of cuts bleeding freely, her clothes in tatters.  
  
><br>The other Outer Senshi were rising to their feet as Sailor  
Saturn  
>prepared to attack them once more. Everyone was brought up sharply  
as a <br>young voice filled with fear called out. "No! Its almost  
here."  
><br>Instantly all eyes moved to the portal. Indeed, the red heart of  
the  
>darkness seemed to be almost ready to arrive. Trying to ignore the  
ache <br>throughout her body from the point blank attack, combined  
with a long  
>day of hardship and abuse, Sailor Saturn sprinted up to the dais  
that <br>the portal was mounted on.  
><br>"Stay here, Queen Serenity! It's my fault that this thing was  
able to  
>get here. With my attack I can destroy a world, not even this thing  
<br>could withstand that."  
><br>Without a second look, Sailor Saturn leaped through the portal,  
going  
>to meet Master Pharaoh 90 on his home ground. Heedless of the  
protest <br>that the Outer Senshi were making, Sailor Moon charged  
after her newest  
>ally. "Wait! You can't! The Death Reborn Revolution will kill you!  
Your <br>too weak!"



><br>Finding her way through the blackness, Sailor Moon was almost with  
>Saturn when one of the bolts of black lightning from Master Pharaoh 90 <br>hit her. They were almost invisible in the surrounding darkness, and it  
>kicked her to the ground instantly. Lying at Sailor Saturn's feet, she <br>pleaded with the girl, even as she knew it was too late.

><br>"Sailor Saturn! No! There must be another way! Don't do it! We want to

>help you..."<br>"DEATH... REBORN... REVOLUTION!"

><br>The control room that Tomoe Souichi had spent so much time and effort

>building exploded. Smoke filled the room, and the sound of flames <br>seemed to come from everywhere. Covering themselves with their arms,

>the three Outer Senshi looked up in fear. This was not what they had <br>been fighting for. They never wanted Sailor Moon to die. She was their

>Queen and their friend, no matter how they treated her sometimes. <br>

>Sailor Uranus collapsed to her knees next to Neptune and looked into <br>the smoke with eyes streaming tears. Whether the tears were from the

>harsh smoke or the harsher loss, she did not know and did not care. <br>Then, though through the smoke and darkness, a shape moved.

Walking

>unsteadily towards them was a small figure in a torn, short skirt.<br>

>The clouds parted for a moment, and Sailor Moon stepped forwards to the <br>sounds of rejoicing. "I'm alive... we're both alive."

><br>To the Outer's shock, Sailor Moon held out a small cloth covered

>bundle. Somehow her magic and Sailor Saturn's skill had been enough to <br>save Hotaru's life. Unfortunately, the spell had drained too much of

>her life energy, reducing her to the age of a new born baby. Once more <br>Sailor Saturn slept until such time as the most powerful and dangerous

>Senshi was needed.<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>Makoto slumped back in her chair as she talked with Rei. The last few <br>days had been just as hectic as before the arrival of Mistress 9. There

>might not have been any Daimons jumping out of nowhere to attack <br>people, but the Senshi had all had their hands full trying to clean up

>after the battle.<br>

>By the time Sailor Saturn defeated Master Pharaoh 90, almost all of the <br>Inner Senshi had been beaten to unconsciousness. Makoto - Sailor

>Jupiter - was the last one standing, and she had been fending off the <br>hordes of evil from her vulnerable friends with her fists and feet.

>Relief had come just as she was feeling that she could take no more. <br>Around her, all the remain Daimons had simply fallen to the ground and

>dissolved into a red muck that had slowly evaporated. <br>

>Since then, the girls had spent their time ensuring that no

documents <br>existed from Tomoe's research. The plans for how to bring Master

>Pharaoh 90 and his kind into this world should never fall into anyone's <br>hands.

><br>Looking over at her sombre looking friend, Makoto tried to cheer her

>up. "Come on, it's not like Hotaru actually died. She's still alive and <br>kicking. The Outers are just going to be taking care of her until she

>gets old enough to help us again."<br>

>After everyone had recovered from the attack and were at Usagi's place <br>with the new baby Hotaru, Sailor Pluto had appeared before them. She

>was completely healed from her cuts, and was her usual poised self.

<br>With her normal blunt directness, Sailor Pluto had explained that it

>was the remnants of Mistress 9 and Saturn Knight in her mind that had <br>caused Sailor Saturn to attack the Outers. Now that she was well, the

>Outer Senshi - the oldest of the magical girl defenders - would look <br>after her and raise her. Hotaru would be able to grow up with them as a

>normal girl, with a safe future.<br>

>Rei looked back at Makoto, finally stirring from her stupor. "I guess. <br>I... I just feel so bad that Saturn Knight had to die to save us. I

>know that he couldn't have loved me. I know that must have loved <br>Saturn, but it still hurts that he's gone."

><br>Along with all of the other events, Sailor Moon had described to

>everyone how Saturn Knight had been destroyed by Mistress 9. Almost <br>dead, he had gone up to Mistress9, and she had totally vaporised him.

>However, his sacrifice had allowed Sailor Saturn to break free of <br>Mistress 9 and save Chibi-Usa, then go on to save the world.

><br>"I'm sorry too, Rei-chan. I never knew him like you did, but if I have

>to die, I'd want to do it saving the world and the woman I loved. It <br>makes it all worth while."

><br>Rei opened her mouth to say something else, but Ukyo appeared around

>the corner of the building. "Hi, guys."<br>

>"Hey." Makoto and Rei stood up and walked with Ukyo out of the temple. <br>It had been four days since Ranma had disappeared, and no-one had

>managed to find a single trace of him anywhere. Cologne and Shampoo <br>were almost out of their minds looking for him, dropping into the

>temple at least once a day to see if he had arrived. <br>

>Nobody had told the Amazons about what had happened to Hotaru yet.

<br>Usagi was still trying to think up a good excuse. Since Cologne was

>such a good friend of the girl, everyone agreed that they had to be <br>told. Although Pluto was against it, Usagi had told Rei and Makoto that

>tomorrow she would tell Cologne a little of the truth about Hotaru, and <br>ask if she wanted to be the girl's god-mother or something. Raising a

>child was a difficult task, and the Outers would want all the help

they <br>could get, even if they did not admit it.

><br>Today Ukyo, Makoto and Rei were going to go though the Tomoe house and

>look for clues for Ranma. The two Senshi realised that a lot of the <br>place had already been searched, but that was to find information first

>on Chibi-Usa, then to destroy Tomoe's research. Now they needed clues <br>on Ranma's whereabouts. Ukyo had already been given an abridged version

>of what had happened to Hotaru when they had seen her appear at the <br>Tomoe place the morning after the disaster at Mugen Academy's tower.

><br>Using the key that she had borrowed from Michiru, Rei let them into the

>house. Ukyo gasped at the complete disarray that everything was in. No-<br>one had cleaned since the Senshi had searched the place, and it looked

>like a team of vandals had been through. Delicately, the three girls <br>stepped over various obstacles on the ground and began searching.

><br>Moving carefully through the house from the front door to the back, the

>three girls searched everywhere. After a while it became apparent to <br>Rei and Makoto that they were very fortunate to have brought Ukyo

>along. The girl's Senshi forms were much stronger, and when they had <br>previously searched the house to look for clues about Chibi-Usa, they

>had not been tidy. Where a Senshi could easily move a bookshelf or <br>cupboard to search behind it, now the two younger girls had to rely on

>the startlingly strong chef to move things for them.<br>

>Being slow, methodical and thorough, it took them until almost lunch <br>time before they reached Hotaru's bedroom. Although they knew that it

>would be likely to contain information on Hotaru, they wanted to be <br>sure that they searched everything. If they had looked in Hotaru's room

>first, they might have found one clue and ran off with that, missing so <br>other vital fact hidden elsewhere. It was with heavy hearts that the

>three girls entered Hotaru's room, because although they had not <br>expected to find many clues, they had not even found one clue yet, not

>a single hint of any form.<br>

>"Hey, aren't those the pictures of Akane-san that Ami-chan told us <br>about?"

><br>"I guess you're right, they must be. You know, Mako-chan, she really

>does look like Ami with that hair cut."<br>

>Ukyo walked over to look closely at the three pictures hanging on the <br>wall that the other two had been discussing. She pointed at the third

>picture along. "But I thought Ranma's wife was Akane... How can this be <br>her if she's that old?"

><br>Rei answered as she walked over to the cupboard and opened it so she

>could search. "No... Well, yes, his wife was Akane, but this isn't her. <br>Isn't his wife, I mean. These are some pictures that had been in

>Hotaru-chan's family for three hundred years, I think. Hotaru-chan told <br>Ami-chan that the woman in the pictures was also called Akane. It must  
>have been a popular name in her family."<br>  
>The three looked through the room in silence for a couple of minutes <br>before a startled gasp brought their attention back to Rei.  
Gathering  
>around her, the two taller girls looked down on her as she knelt on the <br>floor. She was sobbing softly and was clutching something to her chest.  
>Moving slightly, Ukyo could see a flash of bright red, shiny fabric. <br>"Is that one of Ranma's shirts?"  
><br>Certainly the fabric looked like the red silk that Ranma normally wore.  
>With a shake of the head, Rei climbed back to her feet and allowed a <br>long red dress to unfold. Brilliant, fine, red silk set off a design  
>that was elegant in its simplicity. With a modest neckline and a low, <br>scooping back, the dress was full length, reaching the floor as Rei  
>held it by the shoulders. Although they were not the ones holding it, <br>Ukyo and Makoto could tell that it was exceptionally well sown, the  
>seams hardly showing. A dress of such fine fabric and remarkable sewing <br>would be worth a small fortune, surely.  
><br>What puzzled the Ukyo and Makoto most was why Hotaru would have such a  
>dress in her cupboard. Obviously the dress was far too large for her. <br>They could hardly think of any reason why it would be there, unless it  
>was something that had belonged to Hotaru's mother. But then, why would <br>Rei be crying? Makoto moved beside her friend and place and arm around  
>her shoulder comfortingly. "What's the matter, Rei?"<br>  
>Silently, Rei turned the dress slightly so that Makoto could see the <br>small tag that was pinned to the back of the dress. Makoto read aloud  
>for Ukyo's benefit. "To dear Rei-san. I made this dress for you, and I <br>hope everything goes well on your d... date with Ranma." Makoto paused  
>and looked gave Rei a shocked look. "You got Ranma to agree to go out <br>on a date with you?"  
><br>Rei nodded as she silently sat on the end of the bed, still holding the  
>dress to her. She might not have actually gotten Ranma's agreement, but <br>if Hotaru believed that he would go out with her, Rei knew that the  
>date was as good as hers. She had not tried on the dress, but she <br>somehow suspected that little Hotaru had gotten it right. What hurt  
>even more was the fact that for all her care and effort - and it must <br>have been a monstrous effort for her to complete it in the time she had  
>- Hotaru might never get to see her wearing it.<br>  
>A clank from across the room announced Ukyo sitting down on the floor <br>as her battle spatula knocked against a wall. "I... I thought it might  
>have just been me. I really did. You both know how I got engaged to <br>Ranma, don't you?"

><br>When the others nodded, she continued. "As soon as my engagement was  
>agreed on with Hotaru-chan's foster parents at the time, both her  
and <br>Ranma vanished. I know that most of us have been trying to  
get Ranma to  
>go out with us for months now. Every time I've asked him, he's just  
<br>changed the subject. Shampoo says he almost runs away from her  
some  
>times. I think that old woman, Cologne, is probably the only woman  
he <br>doesn't run away from.  
>"What I'm trying to say is... What if Ranma found out that  
Hotaru-chan <br>was trying to get him to go on a date with you? Even  
if he wanted it,  
>maybe... maybe all the pressure frightened him. I guess... what if  
he <br>ran away again? What if he's that afraid of commitment?"

><br>The others just sat in silence as they tried to come to grips  
with what  
>Ukyo had just suggested. Especially since it had a frightening ring  
of <br>truth to the speculation.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Kaioh Michiru opened the door the home that she shared with her  
friend  
>Haruka and looked around. They had been considering moving out  
together <br>for a while, and now that they were taking care of  
Hotaru, it seemed to  
>make so much more sense. When she could not see anyone outside, she  
<br>started to close the door, only to be stopped by the sound of a  
brief  
>cough. Looking down she saw the most ancient and withered woman she  
had <br>ever had the misfortune to lay her eyes upon.  
><br>"I'm sorry, Madam. I did not see you there. Can I help you?"

><br>After pushing the door wide open with her staff, the ancient  
woman  
>jumped onto the wooden stick that was almost as creased as her face,  
<br>and hopped down the hallway of Michiru's home. "Yes, you can help  
me.  
>Where is Tomoe Hotaru?"<br>  
>Feeling slightly silly at being intimidated by such a old and  
fragile <br>looking woman, Michiru closed the door and followed the  
old woman back  
>to the living room where she had already encountered Haruka.  
Standing <br>on her cane, the old woman still did not reach head  
height of the two  
>women, so she looked up at them with a frown on her face.<br>  
>"I shall ask you again. Where is Tomoe Hotaru?"<br>  
>Haruka crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the woman.  
<br>Something about the old woman suggested strength and inner  
confidence  
>causing Haruka to subconsciously maintain a safe distance  
initially.<br>  
>"Hotaru-chan is sleeping. Who are you and why have you barged in  
here?"<br>  
>"My name is Cologne... just Cologne. I am a Matriarch of the  
<br>Joketsuzoku Amazons, and I am Hotaru's sister."  
><br>Michiru, who had been standing in the hallway that Cologne had  
just  
>walked through spluttered and covered up a laugh. "Excuse me please,  
<br>Cologne-san. Aren't you just a little old to be Hotaru's sister?"

><br>"All women in the Amazon village are sisters. Even if that were not  
>true, Hotaru is a member of our village and I am the village's leader. <br>When I heard that something had happened to her and that the two of you  
>had decided to raise her, I came here immediately. I request that you <br>release Hotaru and allow her to come with me."  
><br>"I'm sorry Cologne-san, but that's not something that we can do. Haruka  
>and I have been appointed Hotaru-chan's legal guardians. Not only that, <br>but we love the little girl. I can't just give her up to you."  
><br>Cologne snorted. "I find that hard to believe. Less than a week ago  
>Hotaru was a twelve year old girl, and now she is a baby. Somehow I <br>find it doubtful that the two of you have grown to love her in that  
>time. It is even less likely that you have managed to force all that <br>paperwork through the ponderous Japanese bureaucracy in that time."  
><br>Looking around the recently furnished home, Cologne took in the fine  
>quality of the furniture and it's apparent newness. "When I was told <br>that she had been somehow afflicted to return to a baby, and that a  
>Kaious Michiru was now her registered mother, I became immediately <br>suspicious. I must admit, the strange circumstances in which the two of  
>you have suddenly decided to start a new home together with her does <br>little to inspire my confidence. It would be much better for all  
  
>involved if you would simply hand her over. We shall go back to China <br>and you need never worry about her again."  
><br>A third voice came from the other exit to the living room attracted  
>everyone's attention. It was soft, but filled with the strength of <br>steel. "That would not be advisable. Hotaru shall stay here."  
  
><br>Cologne sucked in her breath, it was rare for her to be surprised in  
>this day and age, but when it came to her friend Hotaru, there seemed <br>to be no end to the surprises. "Mistress Senshi! Hotaru's friend had  
>mentioned that your group was involved..."<br>  
>Sailor Pluto nodded her head and slowly looked around the room, taking <br>in each of the three occupants. She recognised Cologne from the time  
>that she had learned the cure to the Xai Fang Gao Shiatsu technique, <br>but she was fairly confident that neither Haruka nor Michiru had ever  
>met the old woman before. After a pause, she focused on Cologne and <br>gave the guest her full attention.  
><br>"My name is Sailor Pluto, and I am one of the Sailor Senshi. It was by  
>her involvement with the recent evil that threatened Tokyo that Hotaru-<br>chan was... injured. It was at my personal request that these two are  
>taking care of the child."<br>  
>Unconsciously, Cologne nodded her head along with Sailor Pluto. She

<br>knew that Ranma had been tied up in the affair with Mistress 9 and the  
>Daimons. It was also obvious that the Sailor Senshi had been involved. <br>Someone would need to be particularly dense - or never watch the news  
>or read a paper - to miss the fact that the girls were fighting a war <br>on a regular basis.  
><br>"But why choose these two? Surely that matter is now resolved. Hotaru  
>would be raised much better in my village along with the people that <br>truly understand her."  
><br>"I can understand your concern, but this decision has been made with  
>the best interests of everyone at heart. I have been told that you were <br>aware of Mistress 9's possession of Hotaru... Good, then you should be  
>aware that these two have also been briefed on the more pertinent <br>facets of what has happened. They have been told to keep a specific  
>watch on Hotaru so that no relapse can occur, and so that she can be <br>able to be raised as a normal child."  
><br>"Hotaru is hardly a normal child."  
><br>"Truly, that is so. However, it is only here in Tokyo that Sailor Moon  
>will be available to help her whenever it is needed. I and the other <br>Senshi shall keep a close watch on these two and Hotaru and ensure that  
>there is no danger to them or anyone else."<br>  
>Cologne went silent and thought for a while. What they said was true, <br>but she could not shake the feeling that she should take Hotaru back to  
>the Amazon village. Perhaps, in time, she might be able to help bring <br>back the friend that she once had. She did not even know whether  
>Ranma's curse still existed. Was this Hotaru - a body torn apart from <br>Ranma when Mistress 9 broke his curse - or was it Ranma in his cursed  
>form? No-one had found Ranma's body anywhere, so Cologne maintained <br>hope that somewhere deep inside the girl's mind her friend still  
  
>existed.<br>  
>Looking from the two women who lived here and were pretending to be <br>Hotaru's new parents and back to Sailor Pluto, Cologne struggled to  
>find the right answer within herself. When she had first come here, she <br>had been prepared to take Hotaru with her by force if necessary. Two  
>girls who were still school age would be no match for someone of her <br>power. A Sailor Senshi was another matter entirely. Setting aside the  
>possibility - maybe even probability - that Cologne would be defeated, <br>it raised the question of whether she was right in her course of  
>action. The Senshi fought for love and justice. Even Cologne had been <br>saved on more than one occasion by the girls, and their protection and  
>patronage of Hotaru was something that she could not easily discount.<br>  
>Reaching a reluctant conclusion, Cologne looked up at Sailor Pluto and <br>slowly nodded her head. "I... will accept this arrangement.

However, in

>the years to come, I or someone from my village will come here and  
<br>educate Hotaru in our ways. There is much that she must learn,  
from

>fighting to village laws and secret techniques known only to the  
<br>Amazons."

><br>Sharing a glance Haruka and Michiru nodded. Surely in a few  
years time

>Cologne would have forgotten about Hotaru. Would she really be  
willing <br>to put in the effort of coming to Japan from her little  
village in

>China just to train the girl? Not only that, but Hotaru had always  
been <br>such a weak and sickly girl; when her first lessons in  
martial arts

>arrived, she would almost certainly decide to end it herself.<br>

>"If I may, I would like some time with Hotaru alone."<br>

>That request did not go over as well. It was only with the prodding  
of <br>Sailor Pluto that Haruka finally acquiesced to Cologne being  
in the

>same room as their adopted daughter by themselves. Escorting Cologne  
to <br>the bedroom, she closed the thin wooden door and stood on the  
other

>side with Michiru and Pluto. If they heard anything strange, they  
would <br>be inside before Cologne could possibly act.

><br>Cologne looked down into the little Hotaru's crib and reached  
out one

>withered hand to shake the little girl awake. When Hotaru's large  
<br>purple eyes looked up at her and the baby's face curled into a  
childish

>look of fun, Cologne almost cried aloud with pleasure. Her  
enthusiasm <br>was too early, as that was all Hotaru did. She did not  
suddenly speak

>with Ranma's cocky attitude. She did not complain, she did not even  
<br>move to greet Cologne. All baby Hotaru did was gurgle slightly  
and

>drool from the corner of her mouth.<br>

>Reaching out a gentle hand, Cologne cleaned up her friend in much  
the <br>same way that Hotaru must have done when she first looked  
after

>Cologne, back in the Amazon village all those centuries ago. "Ranma?  
<br>Hotaru? Soap? Can you hear me? Are you in there?"

><br>The baby gurgled again and reached up with small, grasping hands  
to

>grip Cologne's green robe. "Oh, my dear friend... How far you have  
been <br>brought down."

><br>With eyes slowly shedding tears, Cologne walked back to Hotaru's  
new

>parents and bid them goodbye with hardly a word. She had never  
realised <br>just how hard it would be to see her friend reduced to  
such a state.

>Ranma had always been so strong. Always so far beyond everyone else.  
<br>Now she had been reduced to this. Even Ranma's remarkable Ki  
seemed to

>have vanished.<br>

>With a heavy heart, Cologne slowly walked back to the Nekohaten. She  
<br>did not hop on her stick as she usually did, the whole effort  
needed

>just did not seem justified in the face of the loss she had just  
<br>suffered. Withdrawing one hand from her robe, she looked at the



>parchment scroll that Ranma had given her only a week ago. He had  
<br>wanted her to look after the Saotome Secret Techniques in case

>something happened to him. Something had happened, and she was  
deeply <br>tempted to break the seal then and begin to read of his  
noble history.

><br>A sudden resolve made her place the scroll back in her robe and  
Cologne

>continued homewards. Hotaru was still alive, and Hotaru was Ranma.  
<br>Maybe. There was still a chance that he would return some day.  
She

>would return, and she would wait for twelve years before she opened  
the <br>scroll. Deep within her, Cologne hoped that with all her  
might that

>when Ranma returned to the proper age of his cursed form, he might  
be <br>granted with return of his old memories and abilities.

><br>Shampoo was waiting for her with packed bags when she returned  
to the

>restaurant. Before Cologne had left, the two had discussed their  
<br>options. There was still a good chance that they might find  
Shampoo a

>husband if they stayed in Japan longer, but neither really believed  
<br>that they would find one to match Ranma. It would be better for  
both of

>them if they returned to their village and let their wounds heal.  
Time <br>would allow Shampoo to love again, and in time she would  
find a

>husband. <br>

>For the last four days, Cologne had reassured Shampoo that her  
actions <br>had not hurt either her little sister Hotaru nor her  
intended husband

>Ranma. They might have caused a few complications, but the events  
that <br>followed had been set in motion long before Shampoo had  
acted. It had

>soothed the girl's conscience, but Shampoo had sworn never to use  
the <br>Xai Fang Gao technique ever again.

><br>"Let us go home, Great Granddaughter. For now, Ranma is as far  
beyond

>our reach as the dead."<br>

>---<br>End of Chapter.

><br>Authors words

>This has been Chapter 25 of Destiny's Child. The story shall be  
<br>finished in Destiny's Child 26: Defeating The Witches. For those  
people

>unfamiliar with Sailor Moon S, the real Tomoe Hotaru becomes Sailor  
<br>Saturn, and is reduced to the form of a baby after casting the  
Death

>Reborn Revolution thereby destroying Master Pharaoh 90.<br>

>---<br>End of comments

><br>

><br>

><br>

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><br> \_\_\_\_\_  
> \ \_\_\_\_\_  
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \ \_\_\_\_\_/  
><br>

><br>What has gone before:  
>This is the last episode. If you don't know what has happened, try  
<br>reading the earlier chapters. We do, however, have an opening  
theme for  
>this episode:<br>  
>"Who Wants To Live Forever" By Queen -<br>Who wants to live  
forever?  
>Who dares to love forever?<br>When all love must die...

><br>-----  
>Defeating The Witches<br>-----  
><br>Though fighting Mistress 9 and the Witches 5 had been hard,  
Michiru  
>discovered that the experience was nothing compared to raising a  
baby. <br>Since they had defeated their enemies four weeks ago -  
Mistress 9,  
>Master Pharaoh 90, Saturn Knight and the corrupted Sailor Saturn -  
she <br>had embarked on an even greater adventure, the adventure of  
new life.  
><br>When she had been younger, Michiru had dreamt the same things  
that  
>every girl did: having children and raising a family. When she had  
<br>fallen in love with Haruka she had realised that there were some  
  
>sacrifices that their relationship called for, and children was one  
of <br>them. While the midnight feedings and constant crying was not  
what she  
>had dreamt about, words could not express just how much she loved  
<br>little Hotaru. It gave both her and Haruka a sense of  
completeness in  
>their relationship that they had never realised they were  
missing.<br>  
>Despite the shadows under her eyes caused by too many nights of too  
<br>little sleep, Michiru beamed as she walked down the Tokyo street  
  
>pushing the pram with the snoozing Hotaru. She was a darling little  
<br>girl, and whenever Michiru stopped for a moment, other women  
would

>compliment her on how nice her baby was. Although Michiru knew that  
<br>Hotaru was not really her child, she cherished her as much as she  
would  
>a child from her own womb. <br>  
>Every day that she spent was a new lesson in fear for Michiru: the  
<br>fears every good mother suffers. At the sound of the slightest  
sniffle,  
>she or Haruka would come running. A single cough rose in their minds  
as <br>the start of some dreadful disease or choking, wrenching them  
from  
>their sleep. If Hotaru ate too little or ate too much, the girls  
would <br>spend hours worrying about her. Nothing was ever as bad as  
it first  
>seemed, and Hotaru thrived under their care.<br>  
>Waking up every few hours at night had taken its toll, but Michiru  
was <br>beginning to learn the lessons of every parent. Not every  
sound is the  
>sign of a disaster, and sometimes you have sleep yourself. No matter  
<br>what they put themselves through for Hotaru, it was all worth it.  
Every  
>time the little girl had opened her big purple eyes and smiled up at  
<br>them, it repaid every second of lost sleep. Her little smile and  
happy,  
>baby laughter was a memory that Michiru could treasure forever.<br>

>School had suffered as a result of the adoption, but she and Haruka  
had <br>hired a tutor to keep them up to date as they worked through  
the hardest  
>time in their adopted child's life. Despite the cost, Michiru did  
not <br>begrudge the extra time or the effect on her marks. She knew  
that for  
>years to come, she would be able to cherish the look of love that  
<br>Hotaru would share with her. Even these days the little girl  
would  
>sometimes look up at her and grin, her big purple eyes shining as  
she <br>gurgled happily.  
><br>It had come as a shock to her three weeks ago when Cologne had  
sent her  
>a letter detailing some legal matters from China. Although the  
Inners <br>seemed sure that Ranma had run off somewhere, Cologne  
seemed equally  
>sure that he was dead. As a result of this, Cologne's tribe had been  
<br>willed Hotaru and Ranma's entire fortune. Cologne's letter had  
included  
>a check for several hundred thousand yen, and a statement saying  
that a <br>lawyer would ensure that Hotaru's guardians received one  
every month.  
><br>Strangest of all, Michiru had been amazed at Cologne's assertion  
that  
>as soon as Hotaru reached the age of twelve, Cologne had arranged  
for <br>her to receive the entire balance of the wealth. Neither  
Michiru nor  
>Haruka came from poor families, but when Cologne had mentioned some  
of <br>the holdings throughout the world that now belonged to Hotaru,  
they had  
>been lost for breath.<br>  
>A brief sniffle brought her attention back to the pram in time for  
her <br>to see little Hotaru start crying. Smiling beatifically,  
Michiru pushed  
>the pram over to the edge of the street out of everyone's way.

Brushing <br>her thick green hair back behind her shoulder, she knelt in front of  
>the pram and took Hotaru out of the blankets she had been sleeping in.<br>  
>Lifting the little girl up to rest against her shoulder, Michiru hummed <br>softly and rocked her charge back and forwards. It was a gentle little  
>lullaby that Michiru's mother used to sing to her when she was young, <br>and it brought no end of joy that she could now sing it to someone too.  
>Hotaru might not be her biological daughter, but in every way that <br>mattered, she was Michiru's.  
><br>After just a few minutes, Hotaru was sleeping again, holding tightly to  
>a handful of the green locks that her questing hand had found. Not <br>wanting to disturb the girl, Michiru held her securely in one arm and  
>pushed the pram on ahead of her. Haruka would be meeting them soon for <br>lunch, and Michiru would be happy to hold Hotaru until then.

><br>Adjusting the girl so that they were both more comfortable, Michiru  
>smiled. On days like these, with the sun shinning and the birds <br>singing, she felt she could walk along holding her precious bundle all  
>day long. The day was perfect, Hotaru was perfect, her relationship was <br>perfect. Michiru knew that things would just keep getting better and  
>better for the three girls in their little family, and it would <br>continue happily for many years to come.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Kuonji Ukyo pushed back the writing pad and sighed. She knew she should  
>not feel guilty, but she did. Five weeks ago, the insurance had come <br>through for the Ucchan, and she had restarted in a better location. It  
>seems that when she had initially taken out the insurance, she had made <br>a slight error in her calculations. Now that the disaster was over and  
>the Ucchan was operating again, she still had a nice little sum <br>remaining.  
><br>The insurance money that was cushioning her rapidly expanding account  
>was not what made her feel guilty. The insurance company had agreed to <br>the amount, and she knew that they would not hesitate to short-change  
>her if they had the opportunity. What made her feel guilty was the <br>astounding success that the Ucchan was having.  
><br>Success in business was not something to be sneezed at. It took luck,  
>preparation, skill and lots of hard work. It was all the hard work that <br>she had been doing that made Ukyo feel guilty, and there was nothing  
>that she could do to change that opinion. Initially, yes, she had been <br>busy. Five weeks ago - when she had opened her new store - she had been  
>run off her feet. By the end of the second day Ukyo had already placed <br>an advertisement in the window for a waitress.  
><br>As word had spread about the quality of her food and the unsurpassed

>service that Ukyo insisted on, more business had flocked in. The simple <br>fact that she had taken on an experienced chef two weeks ago was a

>testament of that. Keiko - the new chef - was a boon that Ukyo had not <br>appreciated until she had been working there for several days. These

>days it was the lack of seating space that had Ukyo turning away <br>customers at the rush hours; a business like that did not happen by

>accident.<br>

>It was eleven o'clock at night now, and Ukyo had been studying the <br>numbers on the possibility of getting Keiko to set up a mobile

>Okonomiyaki yatai. The numbers had looked good all night, right up to <br>the point where fatigue blurred Ukyo's vision and reminded her that she

>should have gone to bed hours ago.<br>

>Sleep was not something that she was expecting to come easily tonight. <br>It had not come easily for the last three days since she had taken a

>couple of hours off to visit Hotaru. Hotaru was the source of all the <br>guilt that Ukyo felt. It was nothing to do with the little girl, it was

>all to do with Ukyo. Every time she looked at the girl that had once <br>been her closest friend, Ukyo wanted run away screaming in denial. The

>girl she had seen could not have been the real Hotaru; there seemed to <br>be nothing left of the brilliant personality that Ukyo remembered so

>fondly from her childhood.<br>

>It had been bad enough when Hotaru had magically been turned into a <br>baby by the evil woman that had attacked her. In those four weeks, Ukyo

>had been able to excuse her lack of visits easily. She needed to work <br>on her brand new business. Hotaru couldn't tell that it was her. Hotaru

>was just a baby, it would be years before she grew up.<br>

>All that had changed less than a week ago. When she was visiting one <br>day, Rei had told her that something strange had happened to baby

>Hotaru. Fearing the worst, Ukyo had left the store in Keiko's skilled <br>hands and raced over to Michiru's place in the afternoon between the

>end of the lunch rush and the start of dinner. There she had been <br>shocked out of her complacency by what had happened.

><br>Overnight - literally - Hotaru had grown into a bouncy and enthusiastic

>six year old girl. Haruka - Hotaru's foster father - told Ukyo that he <br>and Michiru had been awakened by Hotaru's screams late in the evening

>as the two of them had been preparing for bed. Fearing the worst, the <br>two had run into their adopted daughter's room and been stunned by what

>they saw. Rather than a cute little baby, Hotaru had grown to a six <br>year old size in just the couple of hours since they had last checked

>on her. Hotaru's screams had been easy to understand: the nice, warm, <br>pink little baby suit she had been wearing had literally burst its

>seams when she had grown. When they had found her, Hotaru was still  
<br>being pinched tightly by a few last pieces of cloth.  
><br>It was this six year old Hotaru that made Ukyo feel so guilty.  
Ukyo was  
>charging ahead in her life with successes that she had never  
expected, <br>and in the mean time, Hotaru had been set backwards by  
more months or  
>years that she did not deserve. It was not just that, it was more  
that <br>Ukyo no longer felt any plausible justification for why she  
was not  
>visiting Hotaru more often. <br>  
>The little girl was all alone in her age group, and Ukyo still  
thought <br>she was supposed to be Hotaru's friend. While Hotaru had  
regained some  
>of her memories, it was still only to a six year old level. Six year  
<br>old Hotaru did not remember Kuonji Ukyo, and that really hurt. It  
hurt  
>every time that she looked at her friend and saw someone that was  
not <br>the girl that Ukyo knew. Ukyo's friend was gone, maybe she  
would  
>return, maybe she would remember some day, but at the moment, the  
old <br>Hotaru was still dead.  
><br>Ukyo had felt so awkward around this transformed Hotaru that she  
had  
>not returned to visit since then. Worse still, she did not know when  
<br>she would visit again. It was work, it was life, it was generally  
  
>everything. Most of all it was watching a stranger in her friend's  
<br>body. Ukyo was not sure if she could deal with seeing that every  
time  
>she visited, so she had stayed away.<br>  
>Standing up, Ukyo resolutely pushed all thoughts of magic, business  
and <br>Hotaru out of her mind. Walking with the deliberate steps of  
someone  
>who was tired beyond normal measure, she worked her way to her bed  
and <br>collapsed on it. With a pained grunt, she sat up again and  
tossed her  
>bandoleer of spatulas onto the floor. <br>  
>Lying back on the firm mattress, she remembered when she had first  
<br>started using spatulas as her weapon of choice. Hotaru had been  
with  
>her then, both of them in junior high, just starting out as best of  
<br>friends.  
><br>Sighing and covering her eyes with her arm to hide the light of  
the  
>street lamps, Ukyo tried to sleep and stop thinking about Hotaru and  
<br>her handsome brother. It always seemed to come down to Hotaru and  
Ranma  
>in the end. She could not blame Ranma for running out on her again,  
no <br>matter how much she tried. The space in her heart for him was  
just too  
>big, and she knew that someday, somehow, he would come back into her  
<br>life again.  
><br>Ukyo would wait for that day. She had waited years to find him  
and lose  
>him again. Perhaps he was not meant to be the one for her, but she  
<br>would let fate decide that. Fate, and a large, large spatula.  
  
><br>A smile played across her lips as sleep finally claimed Ukyo.

><br>\* \* \*

><br>Rei plopped down in front of the sacred fire in an untidy sprawl. She

>sat like that for several long moments before slowly pushing herself to <br>her knees so that she could present herself properly. Gathering the

>edges of her priestess robes around her, she neatly folded each corner <br>and placed it around her. Once that was done, she moved slightly again

>and realigned them.<br>

>The third time she did this, Rei shook herself thoroughly. "I don't <br>need this! It doesn't have to be absolutely perfect just for a fire

>reading!"<br>

>Looking down at the fire, Rei remembered the time she had done this <br>with Ranma's help. It was when they were investigating the Vision of

>Silence. Things seemed so simple and free in those days. Ranma come <br>around and help her study in the shrine for a while, then they would

>get into a shouting match at each other until she eventually threw <br>Ranma out.

><br>Ranma.

><br>Rei sighed.

><br>"Where are you, Ranma? I know you're out there, somewhere. Where are

>you?"<br>

>It was a whisper, but then there was no-one around to hear her. Her <br>father was still away doing something important. He was always doing

>something important. She had considered telling Haruka and Michiru that <br>raising a daughter was obviously not something that you needed to spend

>a lot of time on according to her father. She did not think that <br>suggestion would go down too well, since all of the Outer Senshi

>absolutely doted on Hotaru and seemed to be with her almost every hour <br>of the day.

><br>"I bet she won't have any problems if any boy runs out on her later on.

>With a 'dad' like Haruka, who'd be game?"<br>

>Slowly she poked the corner of her robes again, moving them around on <br>the floor. There was no worry about them getting dirty, she still

>washed and swept the room every day. She knew she had to attend the <br>sacred fire, no matter what else was happening in the world. It was her

>duty. Unlike her love life, which apparently needed no tending at all.<br>

>"Where are you, Ranma?"<br>

>She could tell by the lengthening shadows that she must have been out <br>here for a while. Time just seemed to pass so quickly whenever she went

>to use the sacred fire these days. Not like when she used it with Ranma <br>in the past. Then it was like a gigantic roller-coaster. Everything was

>up and down, all the time. You never knew what was going to happen from <br>one minute to the next.

><br>Maybe that was why she was so willing to help Chibi-Usa today.

>Excitement. Everything seemed almost dead after Ranma had gone. So  
<br>quiet. So very, very quiet. No egotistical martial artists. No  
strange,  
>Chinese Amazons with their bizarre attacks and stranger names. No  
<br>competition with Makoto for the best looking boy in Tokyo. No  
martial  
>arts lessons. <br>  
>No Ranma.<br>  
>For the last few weeks, everything had even been quiet on the  
demonic <br>front too. With Mistress 9 and her Witches gone for good,  
everything  
>seemed positively deserted. There had been a couple of minor demons  
<br>appearing to the west, but the local Mamono Hunters had taken  
care of  
>them without the Senshi needing to travel all that way. Life was  
dull <br>and slow and dead boring.  
><br>Dead... Just like Saturn Knight. Rei told herself that she did  
not care  
>that he would fall in love with Sailor Saturn. It was his destiny,  
and <br>she knew that Hotaru would someday grow up to be the right  
woman for  
>him. Until then... Until then maybe he would need a friend, someone  
to <br>talk to. She had hoped with all her might that Usagi had been  
wrong  
>about what she saw at the top of Mugen Tower. Surely Saturn Knight  
<br>could not be dead. She didn't think any of the royal families  
could  
>ever be permanently killed, but if he wasn't dead, then  
where...?<br>  
>Reminding herself of the times that they thought that Mamoru was  
dead <br>or kidnapped, Rei had spent almost every night as Sailor  
Mars. She  
>either prowled the city - fighting crime much like Sailor V used to  
- <br>or she would find somewhere that they had once fought or talked  
and  
>just wait. He never appeared. No matter how long she waited, Saturn  
<br>Knight did not arrive.  
><br>Finally she acceded to Usagi's requests to stop. It was only  
when the  
>little Moon Senshi had threatened to join her every night just in  
case <br>Saturn Knight wanted to see his queen that Sailor Mars had  
decided to  
>resign her dedication. She knew she had been running herself into  
the <br>ground, but there did not seem to be much option. She had  
needed a  
>friend, and she was not sure if she could talk to the other Senshi  
<br>about what was bothering her.  
><br>She missed him. As much as she had yelled at the jerk, she  
missed  
>Ranma. That was what it came down to. She missed Mamoru, she missed  
<br>Saturn Knight, and she missed Ranma. Mamoru was Endymion and he  
was  
>Usagi's destined lover. Saturn Knight was destined to fall for  
Sailor <br>Saturn. Why couldn't Ranma be destined for her? Was there  
something  
>wrong with her that she could never have a real boyfriend without  
him <br>being seduced away by some other girl without them even  
trying?  
><br>"Ranma."  
><br>With a practised motion, Rei uttered the sacred words and set



the  
>sacred flames into motion. She had done this every night for the  
past <br>six weeks. Six weeks since Ranma had vanished without a  
trace and  
>Mistress 9 had been defeated. Six weeks without a single sign in the  
<br>mystic fire about him. She knew he was out there, he definitely  
was not  
>dead. But... he definitely was not alive either. No matter how hard  
she <br>tried, she could not summon a single image of his face, she  
could not  
>extract the slightest hint of where he might be.<br>  
>It was irritating and aggravating, much in the same way that Ranma  
was <br>when he had been around. Trust him to keep annoying her like  
this even  
>when he was gone!<br>  
>Rei silently wished she could hear someone call her an uncute tomboy  
<br>right then.  
><br>"Ranma."  
><br>"Ranma? What am I always asking about him for? He never helped  
me  
>before! Feh! He ran out on me, I don't need him, that's for  
sure!"<br>  
>Her spiritual search for Ranma faded from the sacred fire, but Rei  
did <br>not move for more long minutes. A look outside the door  
showed that it  
>was fully dark now. She knew her grandfather would be pleased with  
how <br>much time she was spending with her Shinto practises. He  
would be less  
>pleased if he knew just how much of that time was spent mooning over  
a <br>boy that had deserted her, but she did not see any need to tell  
him  
>everything.<br>  
>When she had come out here this afternoon, she had fully intended  
not <br>to have anything to do with Ranma. She had not wanted to  
spend time  
>searching for him, but it had happened anyway. The real reason that  
she <br>had come here had been Chibi-Usa. The little girl from the  
future had  
>been having a number of strange dreams, visions even, and Rei wanted  
to <br>see what she could find out about it.  
><br>Pushing her long black hair past her shoulders, Rei shook her  
head and  
>concentrated. The flame rose and the image of a pegasus appeared.  
Good! <br>This was exactly what she had been looking for! Chibi-Usa  
had mentioned  
>a pegasus in her dreams. Any further thought was lost as a deep  
voiced <br>scream broke the night.  
><br>"TENDO RANMA! FACE ME LIKE A MAN AND PREPARE TO DIE!"  
><br>She was on her feet and running for the door when she scream of  
rage  
>gave way to a muffled grunt of pain. Worried that the unexpected and  
<br>unwanted guest may have hurt themselves, Rei continued to run,  
hoping  
>that she could get to the entrance of the shrine where the voice was  
<br>coming from before they were hurt any more.  
><br>Rei's sandals were clattering down the old stone stairs when she  
heard  
>the voice waft up to her again. "Damn Shrines! Ever since the curse  
was <br>broken, they seem to be the only thing that I can find...  
Hey, this one

>looks familiar."<br>

>The mention of curses and the person's distress at being in a Shrine  
<br>brought Rei's Senshi instincts to the fore. Before she had  
consciously

>analysed why, she found herself ducking behind some bushes to the  
side <br>of the stairs. Looking out, she noticed a oddly familiar boy  
walking up

>the stairs. He was large and strong looking, with unruly black hair  
<br>barely held in check by a dirty looking bandanna. Although he was

>casting his eyes about curiously, he missed her hiding, which was  
<br>surprising since she was wearing bright red pants.

><br>He was almost exactly opposite her when he stopped and smashed  
his fist

>into his open palm with a meaty thud. "I know this place! It's  
Ranma's <br>little girl's. I can feel you Ranma; I know you're out  
there somewhere.

>Feh, I bet you'll be back here any minute now."<br>

>A frightening smile crossed his face. Although he undeniably looked  
<br>human, he had the largest set of fangs she had ever seen on a man

>before. The evil chuckle that accompanied the smile did even less  
for <br>her feelings of comfort. "I think I might just have to wait  
here for

>him. When he sees cute little P-Chan, he'll never even suspect that  
the <br>mighty Ryoga is back in all his glorious strength.

>"Tendo Ranma, you shall forever regret the day that you crossed  
paths <br>with the demonic might of Hibiki Ryoga!"

><br>It had happened just a few weeks ago. He had been wandering  
along in

>Okinawa somewhere when he had felt an amazing amount of magic  
battering <br>at the curse that linked him to Ranma. Suddenly,  
without explanation,

>he had felt the curse broken. Freed of the binding that had forced  
him <br>to become a little piglet, he had relished charging through  
the woods

>in his natural form. Now he was back in Tokyo, and the only thing he  
<br>needed to make his time on the mortal plane complete was the  
death of

>Tendo Ranma.<br>

>Before Rei's very wide eyes, the large sized Ryoga shrunk into a  
small, <br>cute black pig. A cute little pig with an easy to  
recognise scarf

>around its neck. Quietly Rei drew in a breath of shock as she  
watched <br>Hotaru's little pet P-Chan scramble its way up the  
stairs. P-Chan was a

>demon? Hotaru's pet was a demon? But Rei had held him before, surely  
<br>she would have felt the power. But, if Rei could not have felt  
it, then

>what hope would a little girl like Hotaru have had? <br>

>A low snarl escaped her throat as she again cursed Mistress 9 and  
<br>Souichi Tomoe. They had used the child to their horrid ends, even  
going

>to the extent of binding a demon to be her pet just so they could  
keep <br>an eye on her. With a fire in her eyes that echoed the  
flames in her

>heart, Rei raised her wrist and tapped the Senshi communicator to  
open <br>a channel to all the other Inners.

><br>"Rei here. I've just had a demon walk into the Shrine, saying  
that he

>knew that Ranma was around somewhere, and that he was planning on  
<br>killing him. I've got a few frustrations to work off at the  
moment, so  
>there's no rush to hurry over. Whenever you're ready."<br>  
>With another tap, the communicator shut down before the wiser girls  
<br>could caution her against attacking a demon by herself. She knew  
that  
>it would be a little dangerous, but that was what she needed now. It  
<br>was like Makoto sometimes said: you need some action to take your  
mind  
>off your troubles.<br>  
>Rising in the bushes, Rei pulled out her Henshin stick and raised it  
to <br>the sky. "Mars Star Power, Make Up!"  
><br>Covered in a cascade of brilliant light and fire, Hino Rei  
transformed  
>in the Senshi, Sailor Mars. As always, the feeling of strength,  
speed <br>and magic was almost a drug. Relishing the power that she  
now  
>possessed, Sailor Mars paused for a moment, holding a striking pose  
as <br>she drank in the feeling of near omnipotence that came with  
her  
>transformation.<br>  
>With a smile on her face, Mars leaped over the bushes in front of  
her <br>and began to run up the stairs back to the shrine. After just  
a few  
>moments, she was at the temple proper and looked around. A small  
<br>movement in the corner of her eye identified Hotaru's pet P-Chan.  
She  
>still had trouble believing that such a cute little piggy could  
really <br>be one of the agents of darkness, but she had heard and  
seen the proof  
>for herself.<br>  
>Walking smartly across the flagstones, Mars stopped behind the  
little <br>black pig. P-Chan turned around at the sound of her  
clicking heels and  
>stopped face-to-face with the red toes of her shoes. A confused  
'bwee?' <br>escaped his throat as he contemplated the sight before  
him.  
><br>After a brief, fearful hesitation, P-Chan looked up. Long,  
perfect,  
>shapely legs seemed to stretch up and up. Craning his thick piggy  
neck, <br>he traced the lines of perfection further up past her  
knees, to see the  
>short red skirt billow out over his head and show---<br>  
>Sailor Mars' confusion turned to revulsion as first P-Chan keeled  
over <br>to one side, then blood began pouring out of his snout. With  
a small  
>yelp, she brought her knees together and both hands forced her skirt  
<br>down as far as it would go. "Perverted little pig! Yaah!"  
  
><br>Drawing back a leg so shapely that it could stun a demon (as it  
just  
>had), Mars delivered a kick that would have made any professional  
<br>footballer proud. P-Chan still had not recovered to the point  
that he  
>could think enough to yell in pain as he sailed into some bushes,  
but <br>he did leave a small trail of red to point the way. It was  
not that  
>Sailor Mars' kick had been strong enough to hurt a demon of Ryoga's  
<br>calibre, it was simply that he was still in shock from what he

had  
>seen.<br>  
>Breathing deeply to try and calm herself, Sailor Mars muttered  
<br>imprecations under her breath. She had fought vast numbers of  
enemies  
>before, and while not all of them had acknowledged the freedom of  
<br>movement granted by the Senshi's uniforms, none of them had been  
so  
>obviously insulting to her. "That disgusting little pig! I'll eat  
him <br>for breakfast!"  
><br>Calm enough to think, Sailor Mars walked forwards to hunt out  
the demon  
>piglet when she heard a rustling in the bushes. Reasoning that her  
<br>target would shortly expose itself, Mars gathered herself and  
prepared  
>to make roast pig. The rustling continued for a moment, then she  
could <br>see a pig's snout. However, this snout was larger than  
P-Chan's, and it  
>was getting bigger.<br>  
>Forcing the bushes to each side, Hibiki Ryoga grew to his full  
demonic <br>size. Any trace of the cute, loveable piglet P-Chan was  
gone. This was  
>a ton of demonic death on the hoof. Despite the fact that his low  
<br>hanging belly still almost touched the ground, the arch of his  
back  
>would have topped Sailor Mars' head. His hide had become covered in  
<br>thick, coarse, grey-black hair almost to the point of being  
quills  
>along the ruff of his neck and down his spine.<br>  
>The face was what had changed the most. P-Chan had seemed innocent,  
<br>with big, caring eyes and a cuddly little snout. Ryoga the raging  
boar,  
>a denizen of the nether hells of hideous forests, was built to  
fight. <br>Built to fight and win. Massive tusks protruded from his  
jaws, and  
>thick muscles were deeply corded down the side of his lean face. A  
boar <br>the size of a car, he was all meat, bone and nastiness.

><br>Eyes sunken back behind protective bony ridges eyed Sailor Mars  
  
>speculatively as he idly pawed at the ground, dislodging an  
ornamental <br>shrubbery. With a voice somewhere between Ryoga's easy  
patois, the  
>snorting of a bull and the sounds of an angry cement mixer, the  
demon <br>pig spoke. "Little Senshi. I remember our last dance. But  
I'm cured  
>now, and you're all alone."<br>  
>Suddenly Sailor Mars was not so sure about the idea of letting the  
<br>other Senshi turn up a bit later so that she could work off her  
  
>frustrations. This time it looked like she may have bitten off more  
<br>than she could chew. Releasing the fireball that she had been  
  
>preparing, Mars turned and sprinted for the stairs to the Shrine  
again. <br>She need space to work against something that big. Just as  
importantly,  
>Gramps would kill her if she let a demon demolish the Shrine.<br>  
  
>With a speed that was totally at odds with his bulk and apparent  
mass, <br>Ryoga charged his porcine body down the stairs after Sailor

Mars. Hot

>on her trail, Ryoga followed the scantily clad girl across the street, <br>completely failing to notice the building right in front of his nose.

><br>Although Sailor Mars nimbly leapt out of harms way, the massive pig

>demon was unable to stop as quickly. With a crash that shook the <br>ground, Ryoga's thickly boned head crashed straight through the brick

>and concrete wall, sending debris flying. By the time Mars touched down <br>again - after having done an immaculate handstand over the travelling

>bulk - the dust was settling and the rubble motionless.<br>

>"Well, you're big but you just can't take it, can you P-Chan?"<br>

>When the earth started shaking again and a large, tusked snout pushed <br>its way out of the rubble, Mars backed up again a little nervously.

>"Let me introduce you to a close personal friend of mine. Fire: pig. <br>Pig: Sunday roast!"

><br>While Ryoga bulled his way out, Mars took the time to compose herself

>and bring her hands together in front with index fingers extended like <br>she was forming a gun. Summoning some of the elemental fire that her

>magic was based around, Mars let the ball grow. When she finally <br>released the Mars Fire Soul, she immediately dodged to the side, once

>again allowing Ryoga's bulk to carry him through the attack.<br>

>To her dismay, Ryoga immediately turned around, trying to gore her with <br>one of his huge tusks. Scrambling backwards, she could only watch in

>horror as the massive pig demon trotted towards her with complete <br>confidence. As she watched, she could understand why: all of the burnt

>and fried skin across his nose was growing back, leaving him completely <br>undamaged.

><br>"I normally don't like to hurt pretty girls, but for you I'll make an

>exception. You seem like just the bait I need to draw out that vile <br>Tendo! FIREBALL!"

><br>A great gout of flame pulsed out of the pig's nose, impacting in the

>spot that had contained Sailor Mars just a short second previously. <br>Moving around to the side, dodging several more fireballs, Mars

>remembered when she had seen this demon before. It was when they first <br>saw Saturn Knight. She swallowed nervously as she remembered what a

>difficult fight she and Sailor Mercury had suffered. Worse still, this <br>Ryoga demon looked even bigger and stronger than the last time.

><br>Taking temporary safety on top of a concrete wall, Mars began firing

>her Burning Mandala at the demon. Forcing herself to concentrate, she <br>tried to kept the small arcs of flame flying from her hands for as long

>as possible. By the time Ryoga had turned and started to retaliate,

she <br>had left a line of roasting pig from his tail to his shoulder.  
><br>And boy, did that make him angry!  
><br>For the next five minutes, Sailor Mars was reduced to almost constant  
>dodging as Ryoga went berserk. No building was safe as he charged her <br>and fired at every opportunity. Obviously suited to close combat just  
>as well as ranged, Ryoga easily defeated her one effort to get close, <br>and the fractured ribs that she received seemed to burn in her chest  
>with every breath she took.<br>  
>Moving under the power of her Senshi magic, Sailor Mars was able to  
<br>prevent any more hits once she realised how dangerous he was to  
  
>approach. Her main problem was that not only was he lethal at range  
<br>with fireballs powerful enough to rival her own, but he also knew that  
>he outclassed her thoroughly in hand to hoof combat, so he tried to  
<br>close every chance he got.  
><br>With the number of buildings in ruins, the street was becoming a death  
>trap for a girl in high heels. Ryoga's tough little hooves seemed to  
<br>have no difficulty gaining purchase, and he crushed most obstacles  
>under his feet with practised ease. Mars in turn had to spend more and  
<br>more time just finding the right spot to step or jump, further reducing  
>her chances to return fire.<br>  
>An unfortunate landing after she had attacked mid-air seemed to spell  
<br>the end. Mars landed awkwardly and was shortly flying again as Ryoga  
>managed to belt her with the side of his head. After bouncing through  
<br>someone's fence, she slid along the concrete sidewalk until she  
>stopped. <br>  
>The palm of her left glove was worn all the way through and the abraded  
<br>skin smarted. Looking up past her red, scratched hand, Mars caught  
>Ryoga's eye. He grinned. It would not be much longer; they both knew  
<br>that she was weakened by his every attack, but he simply kept healing  
>all the damage that she was doing.<br>  
>Crabbing backwards on all fours, keeping her eyes on the approaching  
<br>demon, they were both stunned when Ryoga jumped into the air at least  
>three feet and landed on his belly with a loud thud, the sharp smell of  
<br>ozone wafting through the air. In the temporary silence, Sailor  
>Jupiter's voice carried like Gabriel blowing the trumpet on the last  
<br>day. "Sorry, Pig. I've got some \_shocking\_ news for you."  
  
><br>"Don't worry, I've brought some \_ice\_ to the party. SHINE AQUA  
  
>ILLUSION!"<br>  
>Even as Mercury's ice froze a hind-leg solid from a second direction,  
<br>Sailor Venus stepped up and sliced her ever trusty Crescent Beam along  
>the side of the demon's face. One of the large ivory tusks fell off,  
<br>severed by her power and Ryoga bellowed in agony as the pretty

soldier

>in orange finished her speech then jumped down to stand next to the  
<br>still sitting Mars.

><br>"Hey guys, don't think you can \_cut\_ me out!"

><br>The pain he could have tolerated. The damage he might have  
healed in

>time. The puns were an assault on his senses that Ryoga could not  
cope <br>with. Bellowing in agony, Ryoga turned to the only direction  
he had not

>been attacked from.<br>

>Standing in his way was a single girl in a tidy little uniform, each  
<br>bow in place, only disturbed by the very cross expression on her  
face.

>"Barbecues are for the enjoyment of everyone! Not for the crime of  
<br>smelling so tasty like well done roast, but for being so evil,  
you're

>in a world of trouble. I am Sailor Moon, and in the place of the  
moon, <br>I shall punish you!"

><br>Seemingly transfixed by the spectacle in front of him, Ryoga was  
too

>stunned to move as Moon inscribed a delicate arc through the air. As  
<br>she made the movements, she slowly called out her attack,

building

>energy.<br>

>"MOON... SPIRAL... HEART... ATTACK!"<br>

>The brilliant golden beam caught Ryoga fully in the face, outlining  
him <br>in brilliant light. Soon, all that remained of the demon was  
his

>echoing scream as he cursed Ranma one final time.<br>

>Peace restored again, Sailor Moon trotted over to join her friends  
who <br>were helping Mars to her feet. "How was that, Sailor Mars? Do  
you feel

>better now?"<br>

>Opening her mouth to yell at Sailor Moon, the taller girl paused for  
a <br>moment. She had just fought for her life against a giant pig  
demon,

>demolished huge areas of property, been almost fried, knocked around  
<br>and bounced off buildings and this nitwit was asking if she was  
feeling

>better?<br>

>A slow smile graced her lips, blooming into exuberant joy as she  
placed <br>an arm around her leader's shoulder companionably. "I sure  
do, Sailor

>Moon. I sure do."<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>For a time, peace reigned throughout Tokyo after the events of  
Mistress <br>'s defeat, and the city needed it. In some ominous way,  
Ryoga's defeat

>seemed to signal the start of a new series of challenges and  
<br>opportunities for the Sailor Senshi. Soon the citizens of the  
city were

>besieged by marauding villains set on world conquest yet again.<br>

>As had always been the case since Beryl first raised her flag and  
begun <br>to renew her attempts at conquest; the Senshi were the only  
people who

>could stand in the way. As to be expected, it started with the  
littlest <br>things: the dreams of a small girl.

><br>Chibi-Usa began suffering from new nightmares. While she had  
initially

>suffered terrible dreams after her Heart Crystal had been stolen,  
<br>Usagi's caring presence had slowly helped to soothe those  
problems.

>Although the alter ego of the Moon Senshi was often abrupt and liked  
to <br>tease the little girl with the rabbit fixation, she held a  
special

>place in her heart for Chibi-Usa. During the day they would still  
fight <br>and carry on some times, but at night, when tears  
threatened, Usagi was

>there to hold and comfort her.<br>

>During those early days, the two Tsukino girls would also spend a  
lot <br>of time with the Outer Senshi, trying to patch things up.  
Hotaru had

>been a close friend of Chibi-Usa, and she like to visit her and read  
<br>her picture books to the baby every day, even though she knew the

>little girl in the crib could not understand what she was saying.  
<br>

>The sessions with the Outers were more than just a good will  
gesture, <br>they were an exercise in fence mending. During the  
months that they had

>been awake, the Outer Senshi had done some very callous things. For  
<br>what had appeared to be the right reasons at the time, the girls  
had

>resorted to tactics that Sailor Moon would never use, and it took  
many <br>days of talking to reconcile some of those differences.

><br>The person that probably did more to mend the rift between the  
Inner

>and Outer Senshi was little Hotaru. Just by being there, she brought  
<br>out the best in the sometimes-cold older girls. The way they  
would coo

>to her and tend to her every need made it plain that they bore her  
no <br>animosity; quite the opposite.

><br>Hotaru's remarkable health also drove home the truth to the  
Outer's

>assertions about Sailor Saturn's actions at the end. Possessed and  
<br>corrupted by both Mistress 9 and Saturn Knight, she had lashed  
out with

>lethal intent against the Outer Senshi. When Hotaru had been  
possessed, <br>she had been weak and frail; now that she was free,  
her health was

>incredibly good. While they themselves had attacked first, they were  
<br>obviously protecting the world from a dangerously unstable but  
highly

>powerful Senshi. <br>

>Usagi could only nod in agreement and join them playing with the  
<br>darling little girl. Whatever Hotaru had been, she was gone. The  
child

>that the Outers were now blessed with could be brought up in a safe,  
<br>comfortable and loving environment. The mature girls could teach  
her

>how to care for and love others. With them acting as the child's  
<br>parents, there would be no chance of a repeat of the activities  
that

>had almost doomed the world at the same time that it was saved.<br>

>Less than three weeks after the schism in the Senshi had been  
healed; <br>Chibi-Usa was again seeing strange things at night.  
Unrelated to the



>nightmares of her past, Chibi-Usa seemed to be the target of some  
<br>external influence. It became even worse when she would  
occasionally  
>see the visions during the day too.<br>  
>Dreams of a pegasus. A beautiful, white, winged horse, flying  
through <br>the sky. Calling her name and asking her help. She knew  
that she was  
>needed, and that the poor pegasus needed her help, but she did not  
know <br>what help to give. That was why she had turned to Rei in the  
hopes that  
>one of the priestess' famous fire readings would be able to shed  
some <br>light on the situation.  
><br>As it happened, Rei's reading was disrupted by the arrival and  
defeat  
>of Ryoga. Sailor Mercury's readings on the demon indicated that it  
was <br>just an exceptionally strong demon, but still a perfectly  
normal one.  
>Oddly enough, it was the first of many attacks that the Senshi would  
<br>face in the following months.  
><br>Time gave a name to their new enemy, and that name was the Dead  
Moon  
>Circus. More powerful than any of the previous foes, the Amazonian  
<br>Quartet had the Senshi against the ropes for many weeks, striking  
with  
>impunity. It was only through the Senshi's constant vigilance and  
<br>efforts that the evil warriors did not manage to kill any of the  
  
>innocent inhabitants of Tokyo.<br>  
>Throughout this series of events, Sailor Pluto had again vanished.  
She <br>had been with the other Outers when Hotaru was first given  
into their  
>care, but now she was gone. Always aloof and beyond the reproach of  
her <br>peers, Usagi had initially been surprised by the fact that  
Setsuna had  
>missed almost all her meetings with Michiru and Haruka, but it  
seemed <br>clearer now.  
><br>The Senshi of time had always maintained a precious separation  
because  
>of her vital and possibly dangerous knowledge. Now that their future  
<br>was threatened, it was apparent that Setsuna's meddling and  
subtle  
>guidance was the only way that she worked. Knowledge of the future  
<br>might jeopardise the actions she would need to take in the  
present.  
>Worse, if she assisted them in finding the right path to take, the  
<br>leaders of tomorrow would never learn the confidence in  
themselves that  
>they needed to command. <br>  
>Somehow Setsuna also failed to mention to Usagi that she also  
believed <br>that her special position of Guardian of Time also  
placed her above  
>some of the criticisms that had been levelled at the Outers as a  
team. <br>Sure in her power and duty, Setsuna chose the more  
politically correct  
>measure of being busy whenever Usagi came calling. It was easier  
than <br>directly confronting the assertive little princess.  
  
><br>When the Inners learned of Setsuna's faith that they could  
handle the  
>new threat alone, it was a quiet reassurance to the Inner Senshi.

When <br>Sailor Saturn and Mistress 9 had risen, Sailor Pluto had been with them  
>often, directing and guiding them with the deft subtlety that only she <br>possessed. Her absence with a signal that the Inner Senshi were growing  
>into their own power.<br>  
>The powers of the Inner Senshi were growing quite remarkably too, much <br>to the disquiet of the Amazonian Quartet and their leader Neherenia.  
>Each of the Inner Senshi developed their Super Sailor forms, just as <br>Sailor Moon had done before them. Faster, stronger and with better  
>attacks, the Senshi dove into battle with more than their usual  
<br>determination to win.  
><br>No-one took to the powers of the Super Sailor like Sailor Mars.

>Although everyone else had forgotten the letters that she had received <br>from Saturn Knight, Mars had remained true to the man that she had  
>loved; her forbidden, impossible love. Studying the letters, she had <br>explored his instructions on magic and how to focus. With practice came  
>skill, and with the increased power of her Super Sailor form, Mars <br>proved that she now had the capabilities to handle the demands of that  
>skill.<br>  
>Second only to her queen, Sailor Mars lead the Inners as they saved the <br>young boy named Elios. Elios had been the one who had sent the images  
>to Chibi-Usa. As a servant of Prince Endymion, Mamoru's other name, <br>Elios had been in a position to know the true goals of Neherenia and  
>the Dead Moon Circus.<br>  
>It would never be said that their battles were easy, but the Inners <br>fought their way to triumph. While the Outer Senshi watched over the  
>six year old Hotaru, the Inners protected them and the rest of Tokyo. <br>In time, their efforts paid off in a confrontation with Neherenia.  
><br>Light triumphed, and four months after Mistress 9 had been dispatched,  
>Neherenia was imprisoned in one of her own crystals, never to attack <br>the innocent again.  
><br>Throughout the Inners adventures Tomoe Hotaru played and enjoyed

>herself. She was now Kaiou Hotaru due to her adopted mother Kaiou  
<br>Michiru, and accepted her situation as perfectly normal. She had

>Michiru-Mama, Haruka-Papa and Setsuna-Mama. Although her childlike, six <br>year old mind could not remember anything else, Hotaru could not

>conceive of a better family than the one she had now.<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>"Haruka-Papa! Haruka-Papa! Are we going for a ride? Are we? Are we?"<br>

>Haruka looked over the little girl's head to receive an indulgent look <br>and a nod from Michiru. Kneeling down in front of her daughter, Haruka

>gently tapped her nose and smiled. "And what are you supposed to say <br>when you want something?"

><br>"Pleeeaaaaase!"  
><br>"Come here, you!"  
><br>Hotaru let out a girlish scream as her papa lifted her into the air and  
>swung her around before planting her on top of the blonde's shoulders. <br>With one last wave to Michiru, the two of them left the house in a  
>chorus of yelling and happy sounds. <br>  
>Trotting down the stairs, Haruka took them to her bike and lifted  
<br>Hotaru off her shoulders. Sitting the six year old between her legs on  
>the front of the bike where she would be completely secure, Haruka  
<br>brought out a pair of helmets for them. With her own helmet securely  
>fastened, she checked Hotaru's then started the bike. <br>  
>"OK, Hotaru-chan. Where are we off to today?"<br>  
  
>"Racetrack!"<br>  
>"Hmm, I think there's a race on there today. Where else?"<br>  
  
>"Park!"<br>  
>"Park it is!"<br>  
>With a roar of the engine, Haruka surged the bike onto the street and <br>began weaving through the traffic. Hotaru kept her little hands on her  
>handlebar, just to help her steer, but Haruka never let her eyes rest <br>on the happy body nestled in front of her for long. Despite her history  
>as a racing driver and her tendency to drive as close to the limit as <br>possible, Haruka drove more defensively today than she normally ever  
>would.<br>  
>Defensive driving was par for the course when Haruka took Hotaru  
<br>anywhere. A motor bike was not the safest machine to ride, but she had  
>never managed to convince Hotaru that they should use a car. The little <br>girl lived for the thrill and for the excitement of being close to the  
>road, and Haruka melted inside every time the big purple eyes went to <br>work on her. How could she possibly deny someone like Hotaru anything?  
><br>It was only a short ride to the park, but Hotaru enjoyed every minute  
>of it. When they arrived there and Haruka let her off the bike, Hotaru <br>was bouncing on the spot with restrained energy as she waited for her  
>papa to lock up their helmets. Haruka was just finishing when an  
<br>excited voice yelled to her.  
><br>"Too slow, Haruka-Papa. Race you to the tree!"  
><br>Despite the lead, Haruka's longer legs quickly made up the distance to  
>the girl and she slowed down, pretending to run all out as Hotaru raced <br>for the big tree in the middle of the park. Hotaru's athletic ability  
>never failed to amaze and delight Haruka who was an excellent track  
<br>athlete as well. These days it seemed that Hotaru was always climbing  
>on something or running and jumping everywhere. She was just so  
<br>different for the sickly little girl that had become the corrupted

>Sailor Saturn.<br>

>"Ohh, you beat me again, Hotaru-chan! I bet I can beat you to the next <br>tree."

><br>They were off again, both girls with wide grins plastered across their

>faces. They had done these races so often, it was almost scripted.

<br>First the big tree in the middle of the park, then race to the eastern

>corner. After that they would usually chase each other playing tag for <br>a while till one of them fell down exhausted. As much as Haruka hated

>to admit the fact, it was almost her that collapsed first some days. It <br>was only the fact that her bold little Hotaru-chan would probably drag

>her back to the bike and try to drive her home that kept Haruka moving <br>at the end of a session in the park.

><br>Haruka was running away from Hotaru now, just staying far enough away

>that the six year old could not tag her. Although she had loved Hotaru <br>as a baby, it was nothing compared to what she felt now. In Hotaru she

>could see a kindred spirit. Her daughter was just the same lively sort <br>of firebrand that she was, and Haruka loved it.

><br>Sometimes Hotaru would get on Setsuna's nerves. She was always climbing

>over the Time Senshi, playing games with her staff and trying to get <br>the older woman to join them in games. Sometimes Haruka was willing to

>admit that a lively game of tag through the house just before dinner <br>was a bit much, but you would be hard pressed to extract that

>confession from her.<br>

>Personally it could have been worse for Setsuna as far as Haruka could <br>see. What if Hotaru had stayed sickly and taken after the more

>intellectually oriented Michiru rather than her? Setsuna might have <br>been barraged with violin performances or Shakespeare recitals instead.

>Much better that their little girl was a healthy bundle of energy.<br>

>The only thing that worried Haruka - other than the fact that Hotaru <br>had caught her, so now she had to try and tag the slippery six year old

>- was Hotaru's growth. Three months ago Hotaru had aged six years <br>literally overnight. Since then, nothing. While Hotaru was her first

>child (and possibly only child ever), she knew that this was not <br>entirely normal. Surely in three months the girl should have grown

>slightly. <br>

>Despite her growth problems, they held out hope that one day she would <br>have another growth spurt and return to her proper age of twelve.

>Haruka's laughing smile grew even wider at that thought. She could just <br>see visions of their little Hotaru competing in races just like her

>parents had done. <br>

>A while ago Haruka had raised the idea of getting Hotaru trained in <br>martial arts once her growth stabilised. Michiru had been more in

>favour of the more ladylike gymnastics that most schools offered,  
and <br>after a long discussion in bed, Haruka had agreed. With her  
Senshi  
>powers, Sailor Saturn would never need mere martial arts. Even  
worse, <br>there was the possibility that martial arts training might  
bring up  
>some of the unpleasant memories of when Mistress 9 had been in  
control <br>of her mind.  
><br>Seeing Hotaru tiring, Haruka lengthened her steps until she  
caught the  
>girl in her arms and gently tackled her to the ground. After a  
little <br>wrestling and quite a bit of tickling, Hotaru ended up  
sitting on  
>Haruka looking down at her papa with triumph on her face.<br>  
>"I win! You have to buy me ice-cream!"<br>  
>"You'll eat you're dinner when we go home to your mama, won't  
you?"<br>  
>Taking the nod as a solemn promise, Haruka lifted Hotaru off her  
<br>stomach and onto her shoulders again, then stood up. Walking  
towards  
>the ice-cream stand, Haruka was only dimly aware of mothers in the  
park <br>who stopped to admire the handsome man and his daughter.  
Women who  
>often wished their own husbands would be so good with children.  
Haruka <br>never noticed them because as usual she was too busy  
thinking.  
><br>Thinking that she had Hotaru and she had Michiru. Life could not  
  
>possibly be any better than this.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>Ranma's eyes flew open and she held in a pained scream with all her  
<br>might. Nothing more than the slightest gasp managed to penetrate  
her  
>lips, as something squeezed her in a tight and painful manner. What  
<br>made it even worse was the fact that she seemed to hurt most in  
\_those\_  
>places; places that no-one had ever really touched her girl  
form.<br>  
>Working her way through the pain with big breaths, Ranma inhaled  
deeply <br>and quietly. She was not sure why she needed to be quiet,  
but something  
>said to her that things were not right. Something other than the  
pain <br>and the fact that she was female, in a bed, and no longer on  
top of  
>Mugen Tower attacking Master Pharaoh 90.<br>  
>Looking down at herself, she flipped off the warm, comfortable  
blanket <br>and was no longer surprised at her pain. Somehow, someone  
had managed  
>to force her body - the size of a normal twelve year old girl - into  
a <br>set of warm pyjamas that were many sizes too small for her. She  
was  
>literally bursting out of them, but the extra stitching in places  
had <br>made some of the seams strong enough that they did not break,  
only  
>cause her great pain.<br>  
>As silent as a feather on the wind, Ranma slipped from the bed and  
<br>began to remove her clothes. She was half done when she froze in  
mid-  
>movement. She remembered. In every, horrible, mind numbing detail

she <br>remembered what had been done to her for the last three months. The

>first month after Mugen was a complete mystery, but the rest she could <br>recall as clearly as anything in her life. Still shaking from the shock

>of it all, Ranma sat on the bed and wrapped the blanket around her <br>quivering shoulders.

><br>The witches had won. That much was obvious. They had won and Queen

>Serenity was dead. She had to be dead; Ranma's queen would never have <br>allowed the three witches to do this sort of thing to him (or her) if

>she had been alive. <br>

>Ranma and Queen Serenity had gone into the portal to defeat Master <br>Pharaoh 90. That much was perfectly clear, the rest was painfully

>obvious by deduction from the memories that Ranma possessed. They had <br>beaten Pharaoh 90; that evil being was Master of nothing now, otherwise

>the Earth would not be here, that much Ranma knew with ease. Equally <br>obvious was the fact that Ranma's ultimate Sailor attack was too much

>for her to cope with after that day's trauma. <br>

>Evidently the witches had found her in a weakened and probably <br>unconscious condition. Who knows, maybe they found the queen that way

>too. Ranma could easily envisage Michiru and Haruka standing over the <br>unconscious girl and looking down on her with the same cold detachment

>that they had shown with Ukyo's Heart Crystal so long ago. <br>

>"Can we use her?"<br>

>"No, she's too good; too pure. We could never break her."<br>

>Setsuna's voice would come from behind them. She always seemed to lurk <br>in the shadows. "Then kill her."

><br>And they would.

><br>Ranma, of course, would have been another matter. Ranma knew that she

>was not as pure and unsullied as Queen Serenity. She would have the <br>weaknesses that they could exploit. Anyone that could fall for Mistress

>9's lies would be easy prey for a deception as carefully created as the <br>three witches'.

><br>How they had changed Ranma into a six year old and erased her memories

>did not really matter. All that mattered was the fact that they had <br>succeeded. It was not sufficient that they killed her, they wanted to

>turn her into one of them. They wanted an obedient pawn bent to their <br>will. Ranma knew from overheard conversations that they knew 'Hotaru'

>would be exceptionally powerful when she grew up. Sometimes, when they <br>thought she could no hear, Ranma could remember Michiru and Haruka

>saying how important it was that 'Hotaru' grew up correctly so that she <br>would only use her power "the right way".

><br>"The right way". Their way! It was an audacious plan, since the evil

>witches would have had no idea about Ranma's curse. Magically change

<br>the super powered Sailor into a little girl then brainwash her for six  
>years. Pretend to be the ideal parents and she would be putty in your <br>hand when you finally make your bid for power. Elegant, simple and it  
>almost worked.<br>  
>The three witches - Michiru, Haruka and Setsuna - had never known to <br>factor in the curse. Spring Of The Drowned Young Girl. Some of the most  
>potent magic that Ranma had ever heard of in her entire life. Powered <br>by the magical energies of Sailor Saturn's soul, this spring had made  
>Ranma stay the same age for the last four hundred years. Never ageing a <br>day in his girl form, it was proof against almost any magic that he had  
>tried.<br>  
>Even with his co-operation, Mistress 9 had taken years to break the <br>spell and split his body. When he had recovered his cursed form and  
>destroyed Mistress 9, the curse must have still been weak, the magical <br>bonds shattered by the power of Mistress 9's arduous work. Combined  
>with the devastating power of Ranma's own spell to destroy Master <br>Pharaoh 90, she would have been easy prey for witches, and they would  
>never have known about the curse.<br>  
>That was the one piece of luck in this whole sorry tale. The power of <br>the curse that Ranma had hated all those years became the one thing  
>that saved her from becoming an indoctrinated slave. Now that the curse <br>had received sufficient time to stabilise itself, it had gone to work.  
>In one single evening, it had restored Ranma to the body of Sailor <br>Saturn's mundane form: the girl recently known as Hotaru. With the  
>restoration of her body came the restoration of her mind. Ranma <br>remembered, and she was not happy.  
><br>The fact that the curse's overnight growth was the cause of her current  
>painfully small attire was of scant comfort. She knew that she was <br>living in a house with at least two of the witches, possibly three  
>since she was vague on whether Setsuna stayed there on a regular basis. <br>There really was only one thing that she could do in a situation like  
>this. As much as Ranma hated the idea of killing people, no-one <br>deserved it more than those three.  
><br>Setsuna had access to the Gates of Time and used those powers with wild  
>and reckless abandon. Together the three of them were responsible for <br>her friend Kikyo's death, not to mention doubtless others that Ranma  
>had never seen. They had killed his queen, attacked him without <br>provocation and not least of all, they had ruined any possible chance  
>of a relationship with Rei. Worst of all, they had not been content to <br>kill him like an honourable enemy. Instead they had gone to such  
>lengths to destroy his mind so that they could turn Ranma into a weapon <br>bound to them by ties of loyalty, love and ignorance.

><br>Ripping off the last shreds of the pyjamas, Ranma knotted the blanket  
>around her shoulders as a cloak and stood up. They needed to die, and <br>Ranma knew just the spell to use. Ever since she had fought the Daimon  
>and used her Dragon Slave, she had known that it was too powerful to <br>use in the city. The person who had taught him magic - Lina Inverse -  
>had hinted at other spells almost as powerful like the Gaav Flare, but <br>she had died of old age before she was able to pass on all her  
>knowledge. With that in mind, Ranma had been working on a way to focus <br>and enhance the Dragon Slave.  
><br>Even after months of study and thought, Ranma still only had a partial  
>solution. He could limit the size of a Dragon Slave, but it did not <br>concentrate the power at all. The containment section of the spell  
>simply prevented portions of Ruby Eye Shabranigdo's power from entering <br>the world. That did not matter, even a normal strength Dragon Slave  
>should be sufficient to destroy those horrible women. <br>  
>The other problem with the containment spell for the Dragon Slave was <br>time. It would take almost two hours to cast the containment, which  
>made it totally useless for combat. Ranma would have dearly loved to be <br>able to cast a spell with the full potency of the Dragon Slave but  
>limited to only a dozen meters across, it would have been ideal for <br>fighting Daimons or Witches. Maybe Lina would have been able to cast it  
>quickly or been able to advise Ranma how to refine her spell, but she <br>was not here, so Ranma would have to make do with what she had.  
><br>A quick glance at the clock made Ranma smile in a most frightening and  
>sinister manner. A quarter to eleven. A reasonable guess would place <br>that as the time that she had gone to fight Pharaoh 90. Yet another  
>indicator that the witches had taken advantage of his weakened state. <br>It was, however, a good indicator that people would be asleep. Ranma's  
>smile broadened as she remembered that the women she lived with liked <br>to sleep till at least seven or eight in the morning. That gave Ranma a  
>good nine hours to set things in motion.<br>  
>First, though, Ranma needed to prepare. Not the least of which was <br>seeing if she could duplicate some of Mistress 9's work on his curse.  
>Maybe curse was not the right word anymore. After so long, he had <br>regained his memories of being Sailor Saturn. She was a girl, there was  
>no doubt about that, and Ranma was Sailor Saturn. However, Ranma was <br>also Saturn Knight, and he had been brought up as a boy. Even if she  
>had the capability of curing herself, Ranma no longer really desired <br>it. Eliminating his girl side would be... wrong somehow. Not murder,  
>maybe more like suicide.<br>



>Ranma's curse had reverted to its fully active level which was why none  
<br>of the witches had noticed the connection between Hotaru and Ranma. It  
>would have been hard to cultivate the mindless adoration that they  
so <br>obviously desired if they tried pouring boiling water on the little  
>girl. Furthermore, unless Cologne-chan had told them, they would  
have <br>had no reason to suspect that 'Hotaru' would have been  
affected by hot  
>water in any way.<br>  
>Despite Ranma's desire to keep his girl side, there was no reason to  
<br>remain a girl all the time, since his soul also was half boy. The magic  
>of the curse had only just regained enough strength to restore Ranma  
to <br>her proper age, finally breaking the effects of the magic that  
had  
>caused her excessive youth. Furthermore, he only wanted to go part  
way <br>to breaking the curse. Halfway, perhaps, just like he had  
been used to  
>recently. With Mistress 9 having already done the work once and  
Ranma <br>having access to the full power of Sailor Saturn combined  
with the  
>delicacy of his own magical abilities, a partial cure should be no  
<br>great difficulty.  
><br>Sitting on the bed with the blanket around her small shoulders  
to keep  
>her warm, Ranma meditated and worked her own magic. It took a little  
<br>over an hour, but it was time well spent. Changing sex would be  
as  
>close as the nearest hot and cold taps from now on. Just as  
<br>importantly, the time it took to cast allowed anyone else in the  
house  
>to be soundly asleep. By the time she had finished, Ranma had  
<br>discovered an additional bonus: she could now extend Sailor  
Saturn's  
>longevity to her boy form as well. If she wanted it, near  
immortality <br>was within her grasp.  
><br>Stealing quietly from her room on delicate feet, Ranma did not  
spare a  
>single glance backwards. She did not want to remember any of the joy  
<br>and happiness associated with that place. It was all just part of  
the  
>horrid deception perpetrated against her. As she walked down the  
<br>hallway, Ranma turned her head and looked away from a picture  
hung on  
>the wall. She had enjoyed the time shown in the picture so much, it  
<br>hurt her when she looked at it with an adults eyes and realised  
that  
>her entire time here was built on lies and evil.<br>  
>By the time Ranma silently pushed open the door to the master  
bedroom, <br>she had already identified Setsuna as the only other  
person sleeping in  
>the house. Crisp memories of recent months told her that she was  
lucky <br>to have encountered the woman here, but Ranma was never one  
to resent  
>good luck. Leaning her head past the doorway, Ranma clenched her  
jaw, <br>sending small muscles rippling up and down her cheek.  
  
><br>There they were: Michiru and Haruka. They were the worst of them  
all.

>Setsuna was a threat to humanity; Mistress 9 and the Witches 5 wanted <br>to kill people but them... They seemed to take constant pleasure in the  
>destruction of her mind and rebuilding it in their own warped way. Be <br>impossibly good parents and make the kid dote on you. No ordinary  
>twelve year old would have been able to resist their pressures. The two <br>women's plot was so despicable that it made her ill.

><br>Two women....

><br>Ranma closed the door behind her and leaned against the wall.  
Two

>women. Michiru and Haruka were both women. Ranma knew that, but it had <br>always been quite obvious to Ranma that Michiru had not known about

>Haruka's nature. After all, even Ranma had been able to see how smitten <br>the green haired woman had been with the taller blonde. But... they

>were both women...<br>

>Seeing them both lying in bed, naked, holding each other made Ranma's <br>head reel with confusion. Michiru definitely knew the sex of her

>friend, it would have been impossible to miss. But they were in bed <br>together... It did not make any sense. Ranma and Akane used to hold

>each other even when Ranma had been in his girl form, but he was really <br>a guy. Even then, there would be no reason for those two to be together

>since there was no way that a female Haruka could provide a man's love.<br>

>Ranma realised that since she looked like a little girl, no-one ever <br>discussed sex in her presence. She knew that there were lots of

>"special tricks" that she had never known. Equally, Akane had been as <br>traditional as Ranma had been when he was young. Despite all of that,

>two women together just did not make sense.<br>

>Unless...<br>

>Ranma's eyebrows knitted together in a very cute frown as she padded <br>downstairs. The lengths that these two would go to sickened her. Just

>to make it look like they were a normal family, those two women were <br>obviously pretending to be man and wife. Well, soon it would all be

>over, and their dastardly actions would all be for naught.<br>

>Ranma moved through the laundry like a ghost. Running the hot water tap <br>made a little noise, but with the door closed, it would not penetrate

>far. By midnight Ranma was wearing a reasonably fitting set of Haruka's <br>plainest clothes and was a man again. He had completed his

>reconnaissance and was sure there was no-one but the guilty in the <br>house. Stepping back into the main living room, he cleared a space on

>the table and put his plan in motion.<br>

>No-one was perfect, and Ranma was quite willing to admit that somehow, <br>by some extraordinary set of circumstances, this was all a big

>misunderstanding. If it was not for the risk of waking the witches,

he <br>would have laughed aloud at the suggestion, but he knew that it was  
>better to be safe than sorry. So... What he needed was a trap.  
<br>Something that would kill the witches with 100% certainty, but be able  
>to be defused by him and him alone.<br>  
>Aside from magical combat, magical traps seemed to have been something <br>that had caused the mighty Lina Inverse no end of troubles. Naturally  
>she had taught Ranma what seemed like a million and one ways to escape <br>from traps, just in case he ever suffered the same problems. The simple  
>fact that he had never encountered one single magical trap in over two <br>hundred years by that stage did not matter. Traps had been on the  
>curriculum and now he was glad for it. Because once you know how to <br>defuse a trap, you know how to set it.  
><br>Settling down on the floor in front of the table, Ranma began to weave  
>energy in the air. Over the next six hours he built his trap, elegant <br>in its simplicity. The entire trap was based around the containment  
>spell for the Dragon Slave. If the trap was sprung, the spell would be <br>able to escape and activate, destroying the entire house; the Dragon  
>Slave's terrible power limited only by the containment zone. <br>  
>A beautiful trap really, sure to kill almost anyone. \_Almost\_ anyone. <br>Ranma remembered his failure to kill Setsuna in the tower at Mugen  
>Academy. All three of the witches had powerful magic and may well be <br>stronger or smarter than he was willing to give them credit for. What  
>if they found a way to contract the Dragon Slave's area further before <br>the trap was sprung? What if there was some other way out that he had  
>not considered?<br>  
>The answer was obvious: do something they would never think of, and <br>could not notice. Just like any magic user, he was sure in his heart  
>that none of the three witches realised the power of the human spirit. <br>That was why his trap was designed to hold not just the Dragon Slave,  
>but also a Shi Shi Hokodan. When the trap was sprung - or when it <br>finally decayed and activated itself - both magical and Ki attacks  
>would scour the house of evil.<br>  
>Six o'clock. Ranma was ready. The trap was sitting in front of him, <br>glowing with a soft orange light. Settled on the table were strands of  
>magic: triggers for the trap. Once he had thrown them, they would be <br>active and anyone that moved them would instantly spring the trap with  
>deadly results. Now all that was needed was to arm the trap and place <br>the Ki and magic needed into it to make it a deadly weapon.  
><br>Concentrating on all the evil that had been done to him, Ranma began to  
>build the heavy Ki needed for the Shi Shi Hokodan. He remembered how he <br>had lost Sailor Mars to someone unknown. He remembered how

Mistress 9

>had tricked him. How the witches had brainwashed him. All the pain  
in <br>his life...

><br>Glowing brightly in a sick, shifting green colour, Ranma placed  
his

>hands over the innocuous looking trap. Looking nothing more than a  
<br>glowing orange urn, it should not have been able to hold this  
much

>power, but he knew it would. "SHI SHI HOKODON!"<br>

>Shaking from the exertion of limiting his blast to just the right

<br>power, Ranma sent a blaze of green energy from his hands and into  
the

>trap. After three seconds it was done and he inhaled deeply. Almost  
<br>certainly his shout had woken people, because he could hear some  
sounds

>of movement from above. Well, if that did not wake the house, this  
<br>certainly would:

><br> "Darkness beyond twilight,"

> "Crimson beyond blood that flows,"<br> "Buried in the flow of  
time."

> "In thy great name,"<br> "I pledge myself to darkness."

> "Let all the fools,"<br> "Who stand in our way,"

> "Be destroyed"<br> "By the power you and I possess."

> "DRAGON SLAVE!"<br>

>The brilliant pink beam of irresistible magic had just finished

<br>coursing into the trap when Setsuna burst into the room. She was  
dark

>green silk pyjamas that perfectly set off her hair; just the sort of  
<br>thing that you would want to wear at your funeral. Entering the  
room in

>time to see Ranma finishing casting his spell, she glared at him and  
<br>instantly pulled out her henshin stick. Setsuna had no idea what

>Hotaru's brother was doing here, but she could feel the evil  
energies <br>he had been playing with, and could tell instantly that  
he was not on

>her side.<br>

>Setsuna was raising the stick to the ceiling when Ranma reached to  
the <br>table and lifted what looked like a glowing ball of thick  
orange yarn.

>Before she could transform, he had thrown it at her, causing Setsuna  
to <br>instinctively block. Amazingly, there was no pain or  
discomfort, just a

>slight stiffness as the yarn seemed to harden on contact. Snorting  
in <br>derision, she was just about to drop her guard and resume her

>transformation when her eyes tracked the path of the glowing magical  
<br>strands.

><br>What had once been loose coils of magical energy were now rigid  
rods

>leading straight to the glowing bottle or urn on the table. Even  
<br>without the improved magical vision given by her Senshi  
transformation,

>Setsuna could see the bottle fray and shake slightly with her  
slightest <br>movement. The Time Guardian's eyes went wide and she  
looked at Ranma

>with amazement and horror, but without moving a muscle.<br>

>"Yes, that's right you... Ah! More guests!"<br>

>"Michiru! Haruka! No!"<br>

>Setsuna cried out for them to stay away, but it was too late. Just

like  
>Setsuna, the pair had recklessly changed into their living room, and  
>they were snared instantly. Michiru quickly understood their predicament, but Haruka was slower on the uptake. She was only just  
>prevented from blowing them all sky high by the frantic calls of the other two women. For a moment she stopped and glared at Ranma.

><br>"What have you done with Hotaru-chan?"  
><br>Ranma ignored her. He had been rather worried that one of the three of  
>them would have tripped the trap immediately, killing him with it. It was dangerous to have done it this way, but it was the only way that he  
>could be sure that he would get all three. <br>  
>"You will notice that you are now attached to my little trap here. Your slightest movement will detonate the spells that I have locked in  
>there. So I really suggest you remain perfectly still."<br>  
>"Why? What did we ever do to you?"<br>  
>"Wh---? Yo---!" Ranma spluttered incoherently for several moments. "For all of your crimes, this is your punishment. In six hours that trap  
>will open of its own accord, then you and everything else in this house will be destroyed instantly."  
><br>Turning on his heel, Ranma strode to the door and pulled it open.  
>Recovering from the shock of the early morning attack, Michiru finally gathered her wits. She and Haruka had visited Hotaru's room before  
>coming down here, only to find the little bedroom empty and the tattered remains of the small girl's night clothes scattered across the  
>floor.<br>  
>"Wait! What have you done with my Hotaru-chan?"<br>  
>"Your Hotaru-chan? YOUR Hotaru-chan?! \_YOURS!\_ She's dead! She never even existed! You'll never see \_your\_ Hotaru-chan again!"

><br>Ranma was too filled with rage, too busy staking out the front door and  
>slamming it behind him to notice what had happened behind him. All three women had gone as white as sheets, Michiru had almost collapsed  
>on the floor detonating the trap instantly as visions of a murdered little girl filled her head. If he had spared the time to look at the  
>women and seen the utter defeat and hopelessness on Michiru's face as she sobbed "no" again and again, he would have changed his opinions  
>instantly.<br>  
>After a few moments of shock, Haruka turned a bright beetroot red and began to shake in anger. "When I get out of here I am going to find  
>that bastard, and I am going to tear him apart! He killed our little Hotaru! There is nowhere dark enough that he will be able to hide  
>from me!"<br>  
>All three continued to suffer the loss of their adopted daughter in their own way until Setsuna broke the silence. "I've got my henshin

>stick out, but I can't transform without moving. I can't even enter the  
<br>Time Stream without setting this thing off!"  
><br>Haruka swivelled her eyes as far as she could without moving her head.  
>"Do you know what's on the table? Can we afford to just let it go off?"<br>  
>Protected by the arms that she had raised, Setsuna's head was free of  
<br>any of the entangling magic. She shook it dolefully. "No. I'm almost  
>certain that I saw him casting a Dragon Slave into there. If we let  
<br>this thing explode, us, and every house for a kilometre around us will  
>become nothing more than a memory.<br>"We have to diffuse it, and we have to do it fast. If we let it go off  
>in six hours, only the Kami know how many people will die."<br>

>There was silence as they looked at the glowing, magical urn on the  
<br>table. It seemed to be fraying slightly at the edges even as they stood  
>there.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>There were not many stairs leading up to the shrine, but to Ranma, it  
<br>seemed as tall as Mt Everest. It had been four months since his  
>memories had been stolen, and he could remember a few times that Rei  
<br>had innocently visited the people that had kidnapped him and tried to  
>destroy his memories. She may not have said it directly, but he could  
<br>remember Rei asking why Ranma had run out on her.

><br>That was the crux of the problem. He knew that he had been kidnapped  
>against his will, but how could he possibly convey that Rei? She had  
<br>always had a hot temper. Would he even be able to get a word in  
>edgeways when they met?<br>  
>Brushing his hair back, he made sure that it was neatly in its  
<br>ponytail. Placing one foot on the first step, Ranma look up the stairs  
>to the temple and took a deep breath. It would be hard, he knew it  
<br>would be hard, but the most important things in life were always hard  
>to obtain. Inhaling deeply, he held his breath for a moment then  
<br>released it as he began to walk.  
><br>For the last four hundred years he had held himself aloft from any  
>women that he met. In his life he had loved Akane as much as any mortal  
<br>man possibly could, and the loss of that one woman had almost killed  
>him. For four hundred years he had managed to stave off the prospect of  
<br>falling in love again. If he fell in love he knew that it would be  
>doomed to end the same way that it had with Akane. As he stayed  
<br>eternally young, the woman he loved would be doomed to grow older and  
>die in his arms.<br>  
>The struggle to save himself from repeating the pain of that loss had  
<br>failed when he had met both Rei and Sailor Mars. He knew now - with his  
>memories of being Sailor Saturn - that Sailor Mars would have been

<br>perfect for him. Sailor Mars also possessed the magical abilities to  
>stay young forever, together they would never need to worry about  
<br>growing old. Mars had made it painfully clear to him that she did not  
>love him, that in fact she cared for someone else. Those were her very  
<br>words, so long ago: "Saturn Knight, there is someone else..."  
><br>With Mars gone from the picture, it should have been easier to resist  
>the temptation offered by Rei. "She'll reject you too." "You don't want  
<br>to see her grow old." "She could not have been as perfect as Sailor  
>Mars." All these things and more Ranma had repeated to himself trying  
<br>to strengthen his resolution, but it had crumbled when she had reached  
>out and made herself the one to take the first real step in their  
<br>relationship.  
><br>That was why he was here now. She believed he had abandoned her,  
  
>betrayed her even. He knew the unending pain that he would one day face  
<br>if he went back to her, but he could not just run away. Hino Rei meant  
>too much to him, and it would torment him till the day he died if he  
<br>did not get the chance to tell her of the love that he felt.  
  
><br>Walking up the stairs his footfalls had softened into the silence in  
>which he usually walked. Perfected over hundreds of years of practice,  
<br>he had mastered the art of silent movement. His presence was so  
>unnoticeable that he was now less than three feet from Rei and watching  
<br>from behind as she worked at keeping the shrine clean.  
  
><br>Rei's long black hair, so clean that it seemed to shine in the morning  
>light, was tied back today. The gorgeous river of black that normally  
<br>cascaded unhampered all the way down her lean body was held at the nape  
>of her neck in a simple white piece of cloth. Dressed in the apparel of  
<br>a priestess, Rei looked the part perfectly, with bright red, wide  
>pants, and a seemingly oversized white shirt. Occasionally he would  
<br>catch a glimpse of the side of her face or the back of her neck as she  
>worked, and he held his breath, enthralled by the majesty of her simple  
<br>motions.  
><br>"Rei-san." The effect was nothing short of electric. In mid-sweep she  
>stopped and stood as still as a statue. He had not even realised that  
<br>he had spoken, since he was so absorbed in just looking at her.  
><br>"I..."  
><br>With the ponderous slowness that seems to come at every pivotal point,  
>Rei turned, the broom falling from her loose fingers. Watching as the  
<br>woman he loved turned, Ranma swore that he could have counted every  
>single hair on her head in the time it took for her to face him. At  
<br>first as Rei turned, her face was pale and drawn, but he could

see the  
>colour and animation returning quickly. When she finally stopped, he  
<br>could almost see small thunderclouds forming in response to her  
  
>expression.<br>  
>Caught in her big eyes, Ranma did not even see the hand that caught him  
<br>across the side of the face and knocked him to the ground.  
From his  
>supine position, Ranma looked up at Rei and half brought a hand to his  
<br>face, the shock of the blow stinging more than the actual pain.  
><br>"Wh---"  
><br>"You \_bastard\_!" Rei's cheeks coloured a bright, fiery red as she  
>realised just how strong the language was that she had used. "You  
run <br>out on me for four months and you think you can just come  
back in here?  
>Get out! Get out! I never want to see you again!"<br>  
>"No..." His throat was dry and the word barely came out as a  
whisper. <br>Rei would not have heard it anyway. Before she had  
finished, she had  
>already turned and run back for the house. One billowing white  
sleeve <br>was held across her face, soaking up the tears that surely  
accompanied  
>the sounds of her crying.<br>  
>Still sitting stunned on the ground, Ranma distantly heard a rice  
paper <br>door slam shut on its runners. With one hand he delicately  
touched the  
>side of his face where she had struck him. The pain was gone, but  
the <br>burning feel of her touch was not something that he would  
quickly  
>forget. A small, incoherent sound escaped his throat as he realised  
<br>what had just happened: she hated him. The woman that he loved, a  
woman  
>he was willing to love despite the centuries of pain that he knew it  
<br>would bring; she hated him.  
><br>Levering himself to his feet, Ranma began to glow a dangerous  
green  
>colour as his emotions took over from his control. All blame for  
this <br>simply fell onto one group of people. If those witches had  
been willing  
>to leave him alone, this would never have happened. If they had even  
<br>been satisfied with killing him, at least Rei could have rested  
easily  
>with the knowledge of his death rather than his apparent desertion.  
The <br>quick death he had planned was too good for them! He would go  
back to  
>their home and torment those witches until at last the trap  
detonated <br>and ended all their pain!  
><br>He was two steps from where he had fallen when he stopped short.  
Mr  
>Tendo had never let a student give up. His father had drummed in the  
<br>idea of perseverance above everything. Akane would never have  
married a  
>man who quit at the first sign of trouble. But yet here he was,  
<br>preparing to run away from his pain at the first sign of  
hardship.  
><br>It was not hard to find Rei again. He could have followed the  
sounds of  
>her crying throughout the shrine. Standing outside the thin door, he



<br>could not help but think how easily he could have beaten his way  
>through it. Tendo Ranma was a master at more forms of martial arts  
than <br>most people had even heard of. He was as strong as ten men,  
empowered  
>with more Ki than he knew what to do with, and he was the holder of  
<br>some of the most dangerous magical knowledge to ever exist. For  
all of  
>that, it would not help him in the slightest to get through a thin  
door <br>that was paper and thin wood.  
><br>"Rei-san! Please. You have to listen to me. It's not my  
fault..."  
><br>There was a brief sound of small fists hitting the wooden floor  
in  
>pained frustration. "Stop it! Just go away!"<br>  
>"Please! I have to make you understand."<br>  
>"Understand? Oh, I understand all right. I talked with Ukyo after  
you <br>ran off. She understood everything too. I was just like after  
you ran  
>off when you got engaged to her. Wasn't it?"<br>  
>"No! It was never---"<br>  
>"It was! Don't try lying to me! I asked you on just one little date  
and <br>it was too much. You just had to run away and leave me alone  
again! You  
>couldn't even say 'no' to my face, you coward!"<br>  
>"That's not true! I wanted---"<br>  
>"Liar! Leave me alone!"<br>  
>For a time Ranma was silent. Nothing he said seemed to be reaching  
her. <br>If he could not even get her to listen to him, there was no  
chance of  
>him ever explain what had truly happened. Looking down past hands he  
<br>had impotently clenched into fists, he watched the door shake in  
time  
>with the deep, body wracking sobs that came from beyond it.<br>  
  
>Gathering himself once more, Ranma took a guess. He knew that Rei  
and <br>Chibi-Usa had been two of Hotaru's friends. Perhaps, just  
perhaps, they  
>had been back to Tomoe Souichi's house and seen what had been in his  
<br>bedroom.  
><br>"Back before... Before things happened, you gave me a note that  
asked  
>me to go out with you." As he talked, his voice rose to cover the  
<br>sounds she was making. It was vital that she heard what he had to  
say.  
>If he could not convince her with this, he would stand outside this  
<br>door all day if necessary and keep trying.  
><br>"I never got a chance to say 'yes', things happened just too  
soon.  
>But... did you ever go into Hotaru's room at her home?" Silence  
greeted <br>his question. It was better than crying or abuse. "In her  
cupboard, on  
>the top shelf, there was a dress. It was made out of red silk. The  
same <br>silk that I always use in my shirts. \_I\_ made that dress. I  
made it for  
>you... Rei-chan."<br>  
>There was more silence. Suddenly the door slide open. Just and inch  
or <br>so, but it was enough for him to see Rei's bloodshot eyes  
peering out  
>at him. They looked up at him with fear and anxiousness. Written

large  
>all over her face was the clear statement that if the next words out of  
>his mouth were not the ones she wanted to hear, she would never speak  
>to him again.  
>"You made it? What was it like?"  
>Ranma closed his eyes and smiled as he remembered how much he had  
>enjoyed making the dress for Rei. If he was lucky there was still hope  
>that he might some day see her wearing it. "I did. It was long, it  
>would have come down all the way to your ankles if you wore heels. And  
>the back was low, really low. I... I wanted to show everyone what a  
>nice back you have..."  
>She blushed. It was not the red of her furious anger from earlier, but  
>a rosy blush that every embarrassed school girl gets when she has been  
>complimented. "I... I have a nice back?"  
>"Well," Ranma said, plucking at one of her long, white sleeves. "It's a  
>bit hard to tell in this... but yes, you do. All that sweeping and  
>stuff must have helped build your muscles. It looks real nice, brings  
>out the tomboy in you I guess."  
>It was only when he saw the shocked look of hurt on her face that he  
>realise what he had said. This time, as the door slid shut, he grabbed  
>it in an iron grip and stopped it dead. "Wait! Rei-chan... I'm sorry."  
>It... It was something I always used to call Akane. She was always my  
>tomboy, so big and tough and macho.  
>"From the first time I saw you I felt something. I don't know what it  
>was... It was more than just desire, I knew that I needed you."  
>Kneeling down on the wooden veranda just outside the door, Ranma looked  
>around timidly then slowly took one of Rei's hands. She just watched  
>silently, waiting for him to continue. As she sat there, he watched her  
>pretty face and watched as every single emotion he knew of played  
>across its elegant lines. For the moment, her face had settled into an  
>expression of hope.  
>"That was why I called you a tomboy all the time. I knew you hated it,  
>and the only way I could stop myself was by always trying to keep you  
>away. I just knew that it would hurt too much if I ever allowed myself  
>to get close."  
>"Why? What could be so wrong about being nice to me for a change?"  
>"Because... Because if I started being nice, I would never be able to  
>stop. I didn't want to fall in love again, I just couldn't help it. I  
>had to keep you away by calling you names and things, but you came to  
>me anyway, Rei-chan"  
>"You just called me 'Rei-chan' again." She smiled and squeezed his hand  
>briefly. "Does this mean that you don't want to keep me away anymore?"  
>"I couldn't stay away if I tried. No-one in the world could keep me

>away from you now, Rei-chan."<br>  
>"But I still don't understand. Was it too soon after Akane? Couldn't  
<br>you have just waited? I... We don't need to rush things... I'm  
still at  
>school after all."<br>  
>"Too soon? No that's the exact opposite of the problem. It's my...  
<br>well, call it my curse, but I'm not sure if that's the right word  
for  
>it now. Part of my curse kept me young for a long, long time. Did  
you <br>ever see the pictures in Hotaru's room?"  
><br>"You mean the ones of... No! You don't mean that... But Ami-chan  
said  
>that they were over three hundred years old!"<br>  
>Ranma nodded sadly. "I watched, every day, as my beloved Akane grew  
<br>older and older, while I stayed exactly the same. For so long, I  
was  
>frightened that if I ever loved someone again, I'd have to go  
through <br>that all over once more. I tried to stay away from you,  
Rei-chan. I  
>really did. But... I couldn't resist you. You are too perfect."<br>  
  
>"Oh, Ranma." It was almost a sigh, and before he knew it, Rei was  
<br>nestled against his chest. Rei was not sure why she believed him  
so  
>easily, but she did. Maybe it was the little things that had seemed  
so <br>strange in the past. The fact that someone his age could know  
Cologne,  
>but never have met Shampoo. Even stranger was the fact that he was  
<br>supposed to be just as skilled as Cologne, despite the old  
woman's age.  
>Then there was the fact that he was so well travelled with friends  
all <br>over the world. And the fact that he still seemed to be the  
same age as  
>he had been when Ukyo had known him... just like his sister.<br>  
  
>The whole idea of immortality should have been hard for her to  
swallow. <br>Rei knew that she should not have believed in the very  
idea that  
>someone could live for hundreds of years, but she had seen proof of  
it <br>herself. It was not long ago that she and the rest of the  
Senshi had  
>travelled a thousand years into the future to a time when they were  
all <br>still alive. It was a big jump from accepting a Senshi as  
immortal to  
>accepting Ranma as an immortal, but it was a much smaller leap than  
<br>accepting eternal life in the first instance.  
><br>Ranma still had not managed to explain why he had gone away for  
four  
>months, but he was glad that Rei seemed to have forgiven him. For  
once <br>in his life, he had said the right things. Their  
relationship would  
>never be solid until he had bared all his secrets and she had  
forgiven <br>him for his mistakes, but for the moment he was content.  
Wrapping his  
>arms around the girl who was leaning against him, he rested his head  
on <br>hers and inhaled the smells of her shampoo and her fresh,  
clean hair.  
><br>Closing his eyes briefly, he relaxed in the feeling of warmth  
and  
>satisfaction. This was worth it. Every moment of the pain that would

<br>surely follow, it was all worth it for a simple moment like this.  
Moved  
>by the beauty of the situation, Ranma spoke the words that he  
<br>remembered learning so long ago. Words that seemed too poignant.

><br>"What Earthly beauty distilled /  
>Than the single rose  
>Withering on the virgin thorn  
>That live, grows and dies  
>In single blessedness?"<br>  
>In the time it took to say those few short words, Rei had gone stiff  
<br>and the wind seemed to turn chill. Withdrawing from him slightly, she  
>looked up at Ranma with shaking eyes. Ranma was baffled. What could  
<br>possibly scare her so much about a single verse of poetry?

><br>"Wh- Where did you hear that?"  
><br>"I... I don't really know. It was a long time ago. I was just a kid  
>back then. Why? Do you recognise it? I can't remember ever actually  
<br>saying to anyone in centuries."  
><br>"No... I mean, yes, I do recognise it, but you never said it.  
You  
>wrote it down, didn't you?"<br>  
>"What? Yes. How did you know..."<br>  
>Ranma didn't finish as Rei jerked her hand from his grasp and backed  
<br>away, scrambling to her feet. "No." It was the barest whisper but it  
>screamed in his ears. He saw once again the tears forming in her  
eyes <br>and her shoulders begin to shake.  
><br>"No! Why does it always have to happen to me?!? Why can't there  
be  
>anyone for \_me\_?" Ranma tried to reach out to her, to comfort her,  
to <br>try to find out what had her so distraught, but she flinched  
away from  
>his hand. "No! Don't come any closer. Just go away. Please! I  
<br>can't take it anymore."  
><br>"Rei-chan! What's wrong? What did I say?"  
><br>Rei looked up to meet Ranma's gaze, wiping the tears from her  
eyes  
>only to have them quickly replaced. "You're Saturn Knight, aren't  
<br>you."  
><br>"H-How did you know?"  
><br>He never got his answer as Rei retreated with such horror and  
total  
>misery in her eyes that Ranma was unable to move. When Rei finally  
<br>turned and ran sobbing to her room, Ranma was released from the

>hypnotic effect that her words held over him. Lurching to his feet,  
he <br>followed her through the house.

><br>"What is it? I don't understand. Is there something wrong with  
being

>Saturn Knight? Is there something wrong with me?"<br>

>Her bedroom door was closed, so Ranma raised his voice to shout at  
the <br>woman who had just run from him. "Rei-chan! Tell me what's  
wrong! Tell

>me what I did!"<br>

>Rei's voice was muffled, and more than just the door would account  
for. <br>If he understood girls at all by this time, Ranma would have  
bet money

>that Rei was lying on her bed, crying into a pillow. "No! It's not you. <br>I just can't..."

><br>That was not enough answer, and Ranma went through the thin plywood

>door like it was not even there. Kneeling down next to the bed, he <br>placed a single, warm hand on the middle of her back. "Rei-chan.

>Please. You have to tell me what the problem is. I can't help unless <br>you tell me. And you have to tell me. I'll be your shadow for the next

>fifty years if I have to, but I won't give up on the woman that I <br>love."

><br>When Rei spared a moment to look up from her pillow, the sight of tears

>running down her flushed cheeks tore at his heart. Something was <br>hurting Rei, and Ranma could not stop it. It tore at his heart to watch

>her cry, making him grind his teeth in impotent anger. Ranma did not <br>know what the problem was, but when he found out who was responsible,

>he would... he would do something very nasty indeed.<br>

>Seeing the dogged determination on his face, Rei sighed once and sat up <br>on the bed. She was careful to make sure that they were not close

>enough to touch, because if they did, what little determination she had <br>would desert her.

><br>"It's Sailor Saturn."

><br>"What about Sailor Saturn?" Ranma asked in a wary tone.

><br>"She's Saturn Knight's wife. Your wife. When she wakes up, the two of

>you... the two... the... It's fate! There's nothing I can do to stop <br>it! I can't compete for her love with you, because I know I'll lose."

><br>When Ranma's brows settled into a fierce expression, she briefly

>wondered if she had crossed some unseen line. She had tried to tell <br>Saturn Knight about his wife the night that Sailor Mars had broken up

>with him, but she did not think that he had listened to her. Without <br>warning, her breath was stolen from her as Ranma grabbed her hand and

>pulled her to her feet.<br>

>"All right. It's time for you to see the rest of my curse. Then you'll <br>understand that Sailor Saturn is nothing to me. Nothing!" Rei was

>unresisting as he pulled her along and back to the kitchen. She did not <br>know what else he wanted to show her, but nothing could hope to fix

>this problem.<br>

>Leaving her to lean in the doorway, Ranma began searching cupboards. It <br>did not take him long to find a glass, and he filled it with water. To

>Rei's confusion, he held it above his head and looked her in the eye, <br>holding her by the force of his gaze.

><br>"Cold water!" With that, he upended the glass over his head. In a

>matter of seconds, Ranma shrunk; his powerfully muscular frame dropped <br>away leaving a more slender one in its place, the now over sized

>clothes flopping everywhere. Where Rei had just come up to Ranma's  
<br>chin, the figure before her now just barely came up to hers.

><br>"Cold water Rei-chan. Every time I touch cold water I turn into  
a young

>girl. This is why I've stayed young, even after four hundred years,  
<br>because this girl form of mine never ages."

><br>"You... you look just like Hotaru." Rei was almost shocked  
speechless.

>Ranma could not really be Hotaru, could he? Because all the Senshi  
knew <br>that Hotaru was really Sailor Saturn. If Ranma was Sailor  
Saturn...

>well, the whole idea just did not make sense.<br>

>"More than just look like her!" With that, the small, female Ranma's  
<br>shape blurred slightly. Briefly covered in glowing light her form  
was

>obscured. When the light cleared after no more than a second, Rei  
could <br>see the shape of Sailor Saturn. While she was the smallest  
Senshi, she

>held herself with the bearing befitting a warrior of the highest  
<br>calibre. Rei had never seen Sailor Saturn herself, only Usagi,  
Mamoru

>and the Outers had. However, they had all provided descriptions of  
what <br>to look for the next time that she awoke. Rei's biggest  
question was

>how Ranma had known how to look like her.<br>

>"Oh, Ranma, that's very nice, but it doesn't really fix anything. I  
<br>know that Saturn Knight has some magic. Even if you can cast an

>illusion and make yourself look like Sailor Saturn, it's not the  
same."<br>

>"But I am Sailor Saturn! What do you want me to do? Use the Silence  
<br>Glaive and level half the city to prove it?"

><br>"No, but... but you can't be Sailor Saturn. You're a boy.  
Besides, when

>the Senshi transform, they are spectacular! All the lights and the  
<br>power and... you just can't be."

><br>With an equal lack of fanfare to when Ranma had made himself  
look like

>Sailor Saturn, he reverted to being a look alike of Hotaru. "You've  
got <br>to mean the disguise field. When you turn that off, it can be  
pretty

>spectacular. All right, try this."<br>

>With that, Ranma produced a small stick from somewhere. Even though  
she <br>could only see it briefly, Rei instantly recognised it as a  
Henshin

>stick. Could Ranma possibly have been telling the truth? Along with  
<br>their normal identities, the Henshin sticks were one of the  
Senshi's

>most closely guarded secrets. It was not that they needed to be  
<br>concealed, it was simply that once you had transformed, there was  
no

>further need of the stick. No-one ever got to see their Henshin  
sticks, <br>so how did Ranma know how to make his look so accurate?

><br>Any further thoughts she had on the matter were quickly  
overridden when

>Ranma raised the Henshin stick and called out her transformation  
<br>phrase. "Saturn Crystal Power! Make Up!"

><br>Immediately Ranma was surrounded by blasting fireworks of

brilliant

>blue energy. Raising one leg up with her knee bent, the unclad girl  
<br>rotated on the spot, bathed in light and power. Rei could not  
help but

>watch as she saw the Senshi uniform appear over the girl in the same  
<br>sequence that she was so used to feeling herself. Bodysuit,  
boots,

>skirt and jewellery. The girl had everything that a Senshi should  
have, <br>including the fact that she held the massive Silence Glaive  
in one hand

>as she struck a pose at the end of the transformation.<br>

>Rei blinked a couple of times. She blinked a couple more times, just  
be <br>sure that the vision in front of her did not go away. Ranma  
was Sailor

>Saturn. She had seen it with her own eyes. With just a glass of  
water, <br>Ranma had been able to transform into Hotaru, and she was  
Sailor

>Saturn. Rei had just seen the transformation in front of her, and  
she <br>could still hardly grasp it.

><br>She still could not wrap her mind around the idea when Sailor  
Saturn

>stepped forward and gave the priestess the Silence Glaive to hold.  
Just <br>as she had always expected, the Glaive was solid and heavy,  
cool to the

>touch from its pure iron construction. Hard and irrefutable, the  
<br>Silence Glaive was a proof that assured her of the reality of the

>situation. Proof that the man she loved was really a girl, and she  
was <br>really Sailor Saturn.

><br>Looking back from the Glaive to Hotaru, Rei blinked a few more  
times

>and offered the big weapon back to its owner. The short girl took  
the <br>massively outsized weapon and made it vanish as negligently  
as she

>dismissed her own Senshi uniform. Rei gaped like a fish out of water  
at <br>the spectacle. "What? How?... I mean, how did you transform  
before

>without using your Henshin stick, Hotaru?"<br>

>"I'm Ranma, not Hotaru, well, not really. But I don't really  
transform, <br>even when I use the stick. I'm always Sailor Saturn,  
no matter what I

>look like. I'm always Saturn Knight, and I'm always Ranma. All I  
need <br>to do is summon the uniform to look right."

><br>Seeing that she was still confused, Ranma tried a different  
tack. "All

>right, you know I'm a martial artist. I'm a martial artist whether  
I'm <br>wearing a Gi or not. If I wear a Gi, I look like a martial  
artist, but

>I'm still the same person with the same abilities. It's the same  
with <br>Sailor Saturn. When I'm a girl, I summon the Sailor uniform.  
When I'm a

>guy, I summon the Knight's uniform. All the Henshin stick does is  
help <br>to hide my powers when I'm not in uniform. Maybe the other  
Sailors

>haven't mastered that, but I can hide my power without using a  
magical <br>device."

><br>Looking at Rei's closed thoughtful face, Ranma drew some hot  
water from

>the tap and doused himself, growing so that he fit his clothes  
properly <br>again. Mistaking her thoughts for fear, Ranma reached

out and gently  
>held her shoulder.<br>  
>"See, Rei-chan. You have nothing to fear from Sailor Saturn. But...  
But <br>there are other people out there that you might need to be  
afraid of.  
>Bad people. Evil people who might try and hurt you if they thought  
you <br>knew who Sailor Saturn was. So you're going to have to keep  
it secret.  
>You can't tell anyone, for your own safety."<br>  
>"Rei-chan? Are you still listening?"<br>  
>Gradually she drew herself back from her thoughts and threw her arms  
<br>around him, burying her head on his rock hard chest. "Oh, Ranma.  
I feel  
>so stupid. All of this time I could have been with Saturn Knight. I  
<br>could have been with you, and it was all this horrible  
  
>misunderstanding. I'm sorry Ranma. I'm so sorry."<br>  
>"Hey, wait up. There's no need to be sorry. You couldn't have known  
<br>about this until I told you just now."  
><br>"But... Maybe if I'd asked you in the first place, you never  
would have  
>run away from me. I just assumed the same thing that everyone else  
did. <br>We all thought that Hotaru was your sister. I never realised  
that  
>Sailor Saturn and Saturn Knight were the same person. Oh, if I had  
just <br>waited one more day before I drove you away..."  
><br>"Hey, you never drove me away!"  
><br>"I did! I did, and it's all my fault. I was the one that told  
you that  
>Saturn Knight had someone else. I'm Sailor Mars."<br>  
>"You... You're Sailor Mars?... Oh, my fiery little Sailor!" With a  
<br>whoop of joy, Ranma picked up his love by the waist and swung her  
  
>around the room laughing with joy. After only a few circuits, he  
<br>stopped and hesitantly put her down.  
><br>"But... If you're Sailor Mars... You were the one that told me  
that you  
>had someone else. Does... Does this mean that you don't want  
me?"<br>  
>Grabbing him again with all the strength of a wrestler, Rei held  
onto <br>him for all that she was worth. "I do want you. I want you  
more than  
>anything. It was always Saturn Knight that had someone else. He had  
<br>Sailor Saturn. I... I can't believe that I was so afraid of you  
falling  
>in love with yourself!"<br>  
>"Well, I am pretty good, you know."<br>  
>In the middle of the kitchen, Rei stood and held the man that she  
<br>thought she had lost forever. Ranma too held onto the woman that  
he  
>loved. Each of them had found both of the soul mates that they  
thought <br>they had lost. Ranma had Rei and Sailor Mars, while Rei  
had both Ranma  
>and Saturn Knight. Rei squeezed him even harder when she realised  
what <br>else his presence meant. Sailor Saturn had awoken again. The  
Senshi  
>were a full team once more, with one warrior per planet. Rei knew  
that <br>the Outers would be so proud.  
><br>"And I guess that explains where you've been for the past four  
months."



><br>Despite the sunshine in her voice, Ranma immediately clouded over. His  
>voice was firm and harsh. "Well, you don't need to worry about them  
<br>anymore. I've dealt with those three witches. They'll never  
bother  
>anyone again."<br>  
>Rei went cold. Saturn Knight and the Outers had never gotten along.  
If <br>Hotaru woke up there with all of Ranma's memories, who knows  
what she  
>did? "What... What happened?"<br>  
>"Nothing... yet. But they knew who I was, Rei-chan! They tried to  
<br>destroy my mind so that they could make me into their own little  
  
>puppet."<br>  
>"What?! No, that's not true!"<br>  
>"It is true, Rei-chan. I was there. I can remember every detail of  
the <br>last three months. Every instant of their deception is burned  
into my  
>brain forever. They are evil, horrible people and I'm going to make  
<br>sure that they burn in hell for what they did."  
><br>"What did they do? They always seemed too nice. I thought they  
really  
>loved little Hotaru."<br>  
>"Exactly! That's exactly what they wanted you, me, and everyone to  
<br>think. That's how I knew they were faking it! No-one could  
possibly be  
>that nice all the time."<br>  
>"Umm... That doesn't exactly make sense..."<br>  
>"All right then, where are your parents?"<br>  
>"Well, my father is an important politician. He's away at the  
moment---<br>"  
><br>"See! And my Pop took me away from my mother when I was five  
years old.  
>His idea of good parenting was taking me on a ten year training  
journey <br>and selling me off for food. My mother's idea of being a  
good parent  
>was to try and enforce a contract which required me to commit ritual  
<br>suicide if I did not grow up to be a man amongst men."  
><br>Rei looked blank for a moment, so Ranma snorted then elaborated.  
"I  
>turn into a twelve year old girl, Rei-chan. How much of a man was  
that? <br>From the day I was sixteen until the day she died, I had to  
spend the  
>rest of my life hiding from my mother in shame. I know what real  
<br>parents are like Rei-chan, I've seen a lot of them. No-one is  
naturally  
>as nice as those two. They're always going: 'Do you want an  
ice-cream, <br>Hotaru-chan?' 'Are you all right, Hotaru-chan?' Always  
playing games  
>and hovering over me. It's not normal!"<br>  
>Rei took his hand and tried to get him to relax slightly. "Hey, it's  
<br>OK. Really. Just calm down. I guess that you just didn't know the  
right  
>sort of parents, that's all. I'm sure that there are lots of them  
that <br>are just as good as Michiru and Haruka."  
><br>"All right, can you name some? How about Mako-chan's?"  
  
><br>"That's probably not the best example. Both of them died in a  
plane  
>crash a few years ago."<br>

>"Humph. Leave poor little Mako-chan by herself, then go off on a  
<br>holiday without her. Sure it was coincidence, but what's the bet  
that  
>if they did it to her when she was that young, they would have been  
<br>doing it all the time when she was older? OK, how about Ami's  
parents?  
>Why don't we ever see them?"<br>  
>"Well, they're divorced, but Ami's mother is a doctor, so she has to  
<br>work really long shifts at the hospital some times..."

><br>"Making everyone else in the world more important to her than  
her own  
>daughter and I'm not even going to start on her father. I've seen  
Ami <br>moping around some times. That's why she likes the rest of  
you girls so  
>much. You're the family that she doesn't have at home."<br>  
>"All right, all right! Enough with the thing about the parents. I  
know <br>I can find you some examples, you've just got to give me  
some time. But  
>what's so bad about them? I know they seem a little bit stuck up,  
but <br>they're not bad when you get to know them."  
><br>"All right, how this then. They're both women."  
><br>"Umm... Yeah... And?"  
><br>"They're pretending to be a family! Both of them are pretending  
that  
>Haruka is a guy so it can look like a real family. If that isn't  
trying <br>to deceive me, then what is?"  
><br>Rei could not quite hold back a brief chuckle. "You're upset  
because  
>they're lesbians? Oh, come on, Ranma. Be a little bit broad minded.  
<br>They're not bad people just because they're different."

><br>"Huh? What are you talking about?"  
><br>"Michiru and Haruka. The love each other."  
><br>"Well, I'm sure Michiru did until she found out that Haruka was  
really  
>a girl."<br>  
>"She's always known that Haruka was a girl. What's the problem?"<br>

>"But..." Ranma floundered. For several long moments he opened and  
<br>closed his mouth doing an excellent impression of a Koi fish  
gulping at  
>the surface of a pond. "But they're both girls..."<br>  
>"And they love each other..." She tried to lead him to the logical  
<br>conclusion.  
><br>"I don't get it."  
><br>Rei smacked her forehead with her palm. "What is your problem,  
Ranma?  
>They're both girls and they love each other! What is so hard to  
<br>understand about that?"  
><br>"Rei-chan, for most of my life I've been a twelve year old girl  
and  
>I've lived in monasteries. I just don't get it."<br>  
>"Well, maybe you'll just have to trust me on this one. Two girls  
loving <br>each other is completely OK."  
><br>"I still don't understand."  
><br>Growling in frustration, Rei grabbed a double handful of his  
lapels and  
>began to shake. "You don't have to understand. You just have to  
accept <br>it. Now what else is your problem? They're basically

pretty good."

><br>"You don't know them the way that I do. I've watched them. When they  
>weren't around the real Sailors, then they would get up to their  
dirty <br>tricks. Haruka and Michiru, they killed my best friend  
Kikyo. They let  
>her die in cold blood trying to steal her Heart Crystal. They would  
<br>have done the same thing to Ucchan if I hadn't stopped them."

><br>"No... No, that's not true. You have to believe me. They did  
everything

>they could to save that girl. If... If... if that Dragon Slave  
hadn't <br>destroyed her heart crystal, they might have been able to  
catch the

>Daimon and get the Crystal back. You can't blame them for that;  
<br>Michiru-san had nightmares about it for weeks."

><br>"\_I\_ cast that Dragon Slave, and I only did it after the Crystal  
had

>been destroyed. If those two had paid more attention to killing the  
<br>Daimon than to stealing innocent girls' Heart Crystals, that  
never

>would have happened."<br>

>"I... I can't say that you're wrong. I couldn't agree with what they  
<br>did, but they were doing the best that they could under the

>circumstances. If Mistress 9 had managed to get the Holy Grail back  
<br>then, we all would have been dead. The Outers were the only ones  
who

>could have stopped them."<br>

>Ranma narrowed his brows. Something was beginning to sound just a  
<br>little odd in their conversation. "Outers?"

><br>"Sorry, I mean the Outer Senshi. The Sailor Senshi that are  
named for

>the outermost planets of the solar system. Uranus, Neptune and  
Pluto."<br>

>"Phew! That's good. For a moment there I was worried that you were  
<br>talking about the three women I was. Haruka, Michiru and  
Setsuna."

><br>"Ranma, they are the Outer Senshi. Why else would they dress  
that way?"

><br>"I thought that they were fakes! Everyone knows that there are  
only the

>five Sailor girls and Queen Serenity."<br>

>Rei glanced down and counted off her fingers for a moment. "Don't  
you <br>mean five Senshi, and one of them will be Queen Serenity?"

><br>"No, there's... umm... orange skirt, blue skirt, Sailor Moon,  
Queen

>Serenity, green skirt and, of course, the pretty soldier Sailor  
Mars!"<br>

>"You know, they do have names too."<br>

>"They do? What are they?"<br>

>Rei groaned and pretended to cry against his shoulder. It was a very  
<br>nice shoulder to lean on, and only the fear that her friends  
might be

>in danger convinced her to lift her head and continue the  
conversation. <br>"You can be so thick some times. We're all named  
after the planets.

>Didn't it ever occur to you to wonder why you were called Sailor  
Saturn <br>or Saturn Knight?"

><br>"Uh... no?"  
><br>Rei brushed her hair back and moved to a slightly more comfortable  
>position. "But back to the Senshi. Why do you keep saying that there is <br>Sailor Moon and Queen Serenity? They're the same person."

><br>"No they aren't. The Queen's got long blonde hair, but Sailor Moon has  
>pink hair and is a foot shorter. But this doesn't help us with those <br>three witches. I mean, it doesn't help us with the Outer Senshi. I  
>admit it, maybe I was wrong to plant a bomb at their place, but even <br>if---"  
><br>"A BOMB?!"  
><br>"Ahh, yeah... Didn't I mention that?"  
><br>"NO! You most certainly did not! Come on, we have to diffuse it."  
><br>"Sorry, Rei-chan. Before I came here, I thought the Queen was dead. I  
>believe what you've said, I honestly do. But the condition I put on <br>setting them free was the fact that Queen Serenity would have to be the  
>person who told me to. Even then, I don't think I should let Setsuna go <br>free, she's just too dangerous."  
><br>"Well, how long do we have?"  
><br>"I dunno... Thirty, maybe forty minutes."  
><br>"What? That bomb is going to go off in half an hour?"

><br>"Well, unless they've been stupid enough to set it off already." Ranma  
>tried to explain it to her, but Rei was no longer listening. Tapping on <br>her wrist communicator, Rei opened a direct line to Sailor Moon, the  
>girl Ranma thought of as Queen Serenity.<br>>"Oh, Sailor Moon. I really need you to come over to the temple, right <br>now."  
><br>"But, Reeiiii! Mum's just come home with some ice-cream! Can't I come  
>over later?"<br>>Rei's eyebrows drew together and she leaned so close to the <br>communicator that she could almost touch Usagi through it. "If Sailor  
>Moon does not come here RIGHT NOW, then Sailor Saturn is going to kill <br>all three of the Outer Senshi! This would be really, really, \_really\_  
>bad."<br>>"Oh wow! Sailor Saturn is awake again! That is so cool! I'll be right <br>over Rei-chan! I'll even bring her some ice-cream."

><br>Disconnecting the call, Rei looked up at her boyfriend. Was it too soon  
>to be calling Ranma her boyfriend yet? Really, they had been seeing <br>each other for quite a while now and... She snuggled up beside him and  
>wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Rei decided she could definitely <br>call him her boyfriend. "All right. We have Sailor Moon... Sorry, we  
>have Queen Serenity coming over to tell you it's OK. Now, Why do you <br>hate Setsuna so much that you want to kill her? I can understand the

>feeling perfectly, I've just never acted on it before."<br>  
>Ranma scratched at the base of his pony tail. "Well, it goes like this. <br>She's got access to the Gates of Time. The woman who taught me all the  
>magic I know, she was called Lina Inverse. Lina spent a lot of time  
<br>telling me just how dangerous those Gates were. Now Setsuna not only  
>has access to them, but I've felt her use them lots of times. If we  
<br>don't get rid of her now, she'll kill us all soon, even if only by  
>accident."<br>  
>"Sai--- Queen Serenity trusts her. Who do you trust more: Queen  
<br>Serenity or Lina Inverse?"  
><br>"Umm..."  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>When the door opened, three sets of eyes immediately tracked to it. If  
>they were lucky, it might be help, but there could not be more than ten  
<br>minutes left before Ranma's bomb went off. Soon there would be nothing  
>left but ashes. When the Outer Senshi saw a small girl with her hair  
<br>cut in a neat, shoulder length bob, and deep, expressive, purple eyes,  
>they began screaming in panic.<br>  
>"No! Hotaru! Run!"<br>"Quick, get away from here as fast as you can!"  
>"Don't worry about us! You have to save yourself!"<br>  
>Without looking at the three women still held in thrall by the glowing  
<br>strands of her trap, Hotaru walked to the centre of the room and stood  
>next to the magical bomb that she had created. The first thing to do  
<br>was to change the size of the Dragon Slave. There might have been some  
>way to dispel it completely, but Ranma did not think that there was  
<br>enough time for that now. However, changing the blast radius to make it  
>a five centimetre wide Dragon Slave would work just as well; other than  
<br>the fact that they would need to repair the roof and floor in a little  
>while.<br>  
>Before she drained the Ki back into her body, Ranma took a look around  
<br>at the three women. For so long they had pretended to be her parents.  
>They had tried to raise her to be the sort of girl that they wanted.  
<br>Haruka looked glad to see her. It was hard to tell what Setsuna felt,  
>she was obviously in great pain from having to keep her arms in an  
<br>unnatural position for the last six hours; the muscles looked like they  
>were cramping very badly. If she did not deserve so much more, Ranma  
<br>might have almost felt sorry for her.  
><br>Michiru... Michiru looked like a soul that had gone through hell. It  
>had been only six hours, but already he skin had gone sallow and waxy.  
<br>When Ranma had left them that morning, he had told them that their  
>Hotaru was dead. It seemed that Michiru had taken that much worse than  
<br>he would have believed possible. Even just having Hotaru in the room -  
>and in risk - had returned colour to her cheeks. Ranma was sure that

if <br>he left the room right now and let them all die, Michiru would die with

>a smile on her face, knowing that her adopted daughter was safe.<br>

>Ignoring the pleas and yells, Hotaru placed one palm right next to the <br>almost fragmented magical urn that held her spells and Ki.

The only

>dangerous thing left in there was the Shi Shi Hokodan that he had fired <br>this morning, and that could easily be reabsorbed by the person who had

>fired it. In a thin river of green, the heavy Ki channelled itself back <br>from the urn and into her small palm. There was no danger in this,

>considering the size of the Ki blast compared to his total reserves, <br>but it was a depressing activity. In effect he was bringing back all

>the hatred, anger and depression that he had forced out this morning.<br>

>Being on the opposite side of the room from the women, they could not <br>really see what she was doing. Without waiting another moment, Ranma

>ran one hand through a supporting beam of energy and detonated the <br>trap. The women's cries of fear acted as backing vocals to the

>scorching sounds of the Dragon Slave. Only five centimetres wide, it <br>was still almost one hundred meters tall. A column of deadly pink

>energy seared through the floor, table, ceiling and roof. But that was <br>all. Moments later there was a brief second of silence as everyone

>realised that they were still alive.<br>

>With a speed faster than she believed possible, Ranma was swarmed by <br>the older girls. Each of them was crying in relief, and Michiru almost

>fractured her ribs she was hugging the little girl so tightly. The <br>whole time she held her, Michiru kept sobbing how they thought that

>they had lost her.<br>

>After enduring the outpouring of feeling for as long as she could, <br>Ranma released herself and backed away slightly, holding up a small

>thermos that she had borrowed from Rei.<br>

>"Michiru-mama. Haruka-papa. Setsuna-mama. We have to talk."<br>

>---<br>End of Destiny's Child

><br>Thank you very much for reading Destiny's Child. It has taken quite a

>while to write, and I greatly appreciate all of the encouraging mail <br>that I received along the way.

><br>Firstly I must thank Takeuchi Naoko and Takahashi Rumiko for their

>brilliant works. Then I must also thank all of the people that pre-read <br>sections of this story. I realise that I list them at the start of each

>story, but each chapter comes out better than the last because of their <br>advice and comments.

><br>Lastly, a bit for the trivia buffs. I subscribe to the Alfred Hitchcock

>school of self insertion. Look in Chapter 18: Fight! Setting An

<br>Example. In the paragraph starting "Instantly, Hotaru was rolling

back"  
>there is a guy mentioned. That's me! Look for me in future works. I  
<br>should be just as easy to spot.  
><br>---  
>End of Author's bit<br>  
><br>  
><br>  
> <p><p>

## 27. Epilogue: A Learning Experience

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<br>This work to be distributed for free, unchanged, crediting the  
current  
>author.<br>  
>Thanks to my pre-readers:<br>Ben  
>aevan <http://aevan.virtualave.net>  
>Kevin D. Hammel <http://www.anime.sobhrach.com/~khammel/>  
>Blood Blade <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Towers/5920>  
>Mike Rever<br>Robert MacNab  
><br>  
>This story is dedicated to the letter F and the number 8.<br>  
  
><br>Visit my website at

>dzillman@ozemail.com.au<br><http://www.ozemail.com.au/~dzillman/fire>

> \_\_\_\_\_<br> / \  
> | Destiny's Child |<br> \ \_\_\_\_\_/  
><br>

>-----<br>Epilogue 1: A Learning  
Experience

>-----<br>

><br>"I'm home!"

><br>The door slammed, and Michiru was just in time turning around to  
be

>able to catch a bundle of black haired energy as it tried to run  
past <br>her. The smaller girl's hug was not exactly what would be  
called

>enthusiastic, but it she was no longer struggling to get away like  
she <br>had yesterday. It was still only two days since Michiru's  
worst

>nightmare had come to life, and now she was just glad that she could  
<br>hold onto some of the happiness that she had one had.

><br>Two days ago, Michiru's world had come crashing down in chaos.

>Awakening to a shout, she and Haruka had been treated to the idea  
that <br>their dear foster child Hotaru had been killed in cold blood  
by her

>brother. The fact that she herself was going to be dead soon after  
that <br>made little difference - almost comforting really - but the  
thought of

>her beloved Haruka dying had turned the knife in the open wound of  
her <br>soul.

><br>Michiru had survived the torturous six hours that followed as  
Setsuna

>and Haruka tried think of a way they could defuse the bomb that  
<br>threatened them, but she was more dead than alive the whole time.

>Losing Hotaru had hurt her more than she could comprehend, and the  
only <br>thing that had brought her back to the world was when that  
same girl -

>presumed dead - walked into the room.<br>

>Seeing Hotaru alive and having her save all three of the Outer  
Senshi <br>from certain death was enough to break the last bastions  
of Michiru's

>mental defences. Holding Hotaru in her arms like she was clinging to  
a <br>life preserver, Michiru had cried in earnest, sobbing  
uncontrollably

>even as Hotaru had tried to talk. It had taken hours to her calm her  
<br>down, and hours more before Hotaru, Mars and Sailor Moon had been  
able

>to explain things.<br>

>Michiru would have believed what Hotaru told her without needing the  
<br>other two girls there, but her spouse and occasional housemate

>definitely needed the support of the Inners' calm voices. Calm  
voices <br>that sometimes were the only source of reason in the room.  
Michiru

>would never forget the brief moment where Sailor Moon stepped  
between <br>Sailor Pluto and Sailor Saturn. Both held weapons  
crackling with barely

>contained energy, and each wanted to kill the other. Only when  
Sailor <br>Moon risked her life did Sailor Pluto finally raise her  
weapon and

>disappear into the time stream. Saturn had silently morphed back  
into <br>Hotaru, glaring at everyone in anger until Michiru had  
picked her up

>and placed her on her lap. <br>

>Hotaru had been so startled by that action she had not reacted for  
<br>several precious moments; at least, they had been precious to  
Michiru.

>Overcoming her shock at still being treated like a little girl,  
Hotaru <br>had slapped Michiru and leapt back to her feet. It had not  
been a hard

>blow, but the meaning was clear enough to everyone: she might look  
like <br>Hotaru, but this little girl was someone else entirely.

><br>That simple act of rebellion seemed to calm Hotaru, in many ways  
it

>seemed to shock her as much as it had shocked Michiru. No matter  
what <br>their thoughts on that matter, it did quiet everyone for a  
while, and

>allow Rei to talk. Rei needed to be the one doing the talking,  
because <br>she both knew everything and was not as blinded by  
emotion as everyone

>else in the room. Unfortunately, it was also at that time that  
Sailor <br>Moon needed to leave. Without Sailor Pluto, there was  
little danger of

>her Senshi killing each other, and since she was still an ordinary  
girl <br>with parents that worried, Sailor Moon had bid them a good  
night and

>wished Rei the best in mending relations.<br>

>It was from that point on that everyone had finally gotten the  
<br>explanations out into the air and everything was cleared up. It  
had all



>been so confusing, it still was, but Michiru understood one thing:  
<br>things would never be the same. The girl she loved and had raised  
as a  
>baby was gone. Intellectually she admitted that Ranma had every  
right <br>to be angry and confused, but it did not help the pain.

><br>When night had fallen, Hotaru had left with Rei, and it was like

>watching a piece of their life walk into the darkness. Michiru and  
<br>Haruka had both invested so much love and time with the child, it  
hurt

>so much to see her walk out on them. Michiru had cried almost  
<br>continuously for two hours after that.

><br>She was still holding onto her partner and sniffing when there  
was a

>soft knock on the door late that night. When Haruka opened the door,  
it <br>revealed someone that they were not entirely sure that they  
would see

>again; Ranma, in his boy form. He was tall, proud and strong, but  
there <br>was something in his eyes... A pain, a loss, a recognition  
of the truth

>perhaps.<br>

>He had looked at both Michiru and Haruka, and Michiru could feel her  
<br>heart break all over again. Just looking into his eyes, she could  
see

>that he understood their confusion and loss. From the way that he  
stood <br>in the doorway and nervously shuffled, it was obvious he  
was not

>entirely sure why he was there either. As the silence stretched and  
<br>became unbearable, Haruka had eventually forced herself to start

>speaking.<br>

>"Ranma---" <br>

>"I ain't calling you 'Mama' and 'Papa'... I was just wondering...  
Can <br>I... Can I stay here tonight?"

><br>They had both nodded with some trepidation, but Ranma had simply  
come

>in and walked off to his room. They had not stopped him, nor had  
they <br>even tried to ask him what had brought him back. It was her  
fear that

>had not allowed her to question it, but somehow, Michiru hoped that  
her <br>daughter was still with them somehow, and she felt something  
for them

>still. All Michiru really wanted then was for Ranma to change back  
into <br>Hotaru and call her "Michiru-mama" like she once had, but  
the girl was

>quite certain that would not happen any day soon.<br>

>Blinking her eyes, Michiru realised that she was still holding  
Hotaru, <br>and both of them were in the house. A small, gentle  
finger raised to

>her face and gently brushed across her cheek removing a trail of  
<br>moisture.

><br>"Don't cry, Michiru-san. Things aren't that bad."

><br>Michiru strengthened her hug for a moment then set the girl  
down,

>ruffling her hair. This Hotaru was not the same one that they had  
<br>raised, that was evident to everyone. She was too tall, too  
mature, too

>wise in the ways of the world. Far too wise in the ways of fighting  
and <br>death for the cherished child of Kaiou Michiru. Maybe others

could not

>see it, but when Michiru looked into this eyes of this adult in a  
<br>child's body, she could see her daughter.

><br>She had never asked Ranma or Hotaru what made her come back that night.

>Nor had she ever questioned why the girl wanted to stay with them.

<br>Somehow, to do so would be tempting fate, and Michiru counted herself

>satisfied that she could have Hotaru back with her in whatever form the <br>girl took.

><br>Although she had meant well, Hotaru's recent gesture was another spike

>through her heart. Michiru's child might have done exactly the same  
<br>thing, but she would not have called Michiru by her name. It was always

>"Mama", more familiar, closer, friendlier. Knowing that she could not <br>have everything in the world, Michiru put on a happy - if slightly

>strained face - and smiled back.<br>

>"Hey, what are you doing hanging around in the kitchen with us old  
<br>women? Don't you have a hot date with Rei-chan tonight?"

><br>Hotaru blushed and playfully slapped Michiru's hand. "Hey, it's not

>like that! Tonight they're going to introduce me to the rest of the  
<br>Senshi. You ought to know that, you're going to be there!"

><br>Michiru turned Hotaru around and pushed her towards the living room.

>"Yes, but we're going later. Now go say hello to Haruka and get  
<br>changed."

><br>Without a sound, Hotaru dashed through the house. Michiru sighed.

>Tonight would be difficult. Not because of Sailor Saturn; she knew that <br>Hotaru or Ranma would be able to control themselves. It was Setsuna

>that worried her. The Guardian of Time had not deigned to show her face <br>in the last two days, and it worried Michiru that Setsuna might be

>planning something against Saturn. But if Setsuna set herself against <br>the newest Senshi, Michiru knew which side she and Haruka would take.

>It would be a definite blow to the team if they had to do without the <br>Time Senshi. But blood is thicker than water, and even if the new

>Hotaru was not as much her daughter as she once was, Michiru would  
<br>still fight for her to her last breath.

><br>Leaving her foster mother behind, Hotaru dodged a couple of walls and

>sprinted straight at Haruka. The fact that Haruka was sitting on the  
<br>couch reading a newspaper, and there was a wide coffee table separating

>them did not make any difference to her. Just before she hit the table, <br>Hotaru launched herself into the air and over the obstacles. Haruka

>spotted her in mid air, but before she could even drop her paper, <br>Hotaru had passed overhead, doing a brief handstand on the blonde hair

>to give her the final spin she needed for a perfect landing.<br>

>While the carpet was still flexing from the impact of her white cotton  
<br>clad feet, Hotaru threw her arms around the blonde girls neck, lightly  
>applying a choke hold. "Come on, Haruka. You said you were supposed to  
<br>be good at martial arts. Anyone could have attacked you then. What  
>could you be reading that's so interesting?"<br>  
>Haruka cleared her throat and smiled a little as Hotaru released her  
<br>hold. The idea of herself as a father figure to Hotaru had been blown  
>out the window, and she had wondered if there was any place for her in  
<br>the strange family that was struggling to find its form. Since that  
>night, she and Ranma had not really talked to each other. Glad that  
<br>Hotaru had been the one to make the gesture, Haruka kept her tone  
  
>light, just for the hope of being able to find some sort of common  
<br>ground with the latest Senshi.  
><br>"Just keeping up on the latest race results."  
><br>"Car racing \_again\_? You're going to be able to come to the park this  
this  
>weekend, aren't you?"<br>  
>"The park? But I thought..."<br>  
>"What? Just because I've regained my memories doesn't mean I can't  
<br>enjoy getting some exercise, can it?"  
><br>Haruka grinned. She knew that Michiru still felt that their girl was  
was  
>inside this new person, and now maybe she was beginning to agree. A  
<br>phone call to Rei and Chibi-Usa yesterday told her that Ranma and  
  
>Hotaru had been lively, youthful, irreverent and full of energy, but  
<br>she somehow could not get past the idea that someone four hundred years  
years  
>old should act differently. Then again, they had met Saturn Knight on  
<br>several occasions, and he did not seem to be the all wise, all knowing  
knowing  
>person that Haruka expected of someone that had spent centuries in  
<br>various monasteries.  
><br>"Oh, I suppose in that case you think that you could take me in a  
a  
>wresting match now, just because you've gained a few inches.  
Hmmm?"<br>  
>Hotaru laughed. This was better, Haruka had been far too serious for  
<br>the last couple of days. "Well, I was going to change and show you what  
you what  
>a real man can do, but I suppose you need every advantage you can get."  
<br>  
>Coughs and splutters shook the broad shoulders under Hotaru's arms.  
<br>That jab about Haruka's sex and her attraction to Michiru was almost  
almost  
>enough to get her angry, but she decided to take it in the tone that it  
<br>was meant.  
><br>"You what?! Leave that eight foot walking stick of yours at home, old  
home, old  
>woman, and I'll show you a thing or two."<br>  
>Hotaru released her, one arm brushing almost absently across Haruka's  
<br>shoulder as the small girl walked away. Halfway across the room, Hotaru  
the room, Hotaru  
>paused. She hesitated a couple of times, the finally flashed a smile.  
<br>"Thank you, Haruka-san."

><br>Raising her left hand, Haruka gently touched the spot on her neck where  
>their skin had touched. Her little girl was still alive. She was Ranma, <br>but... but she was still their Hotaru. Tossing down the paper, Haruka  
>walked into the kitchen. Maybe Michiru had a better idea what was going <br>on than her.  
><br>In her room, Hotaru sat on the end of the bed and looked at her  
  
>reflection in the mirror. It was a girl's face, girl's body and girl's <br>clothes, but somehow that did not matter as much to her anymore. Ever  
>since she had become Sailor Saturn, she realised that she did not <br>really mind being a girl. Not any more; she was part girl now, she knew  
>it was well within her abilities to force the shape changing magic to <br>only respond to freezing water, but somehow that seemed wrong. She was  
>a boy at heart, but Hotaru found that she no longer minded being a <br>girl.  
><br>Of course, that was not to say that she fancied boys or anything. Like  
>her disturbing 'parents', Ranma firmly believed that he only had <br>interest in girls, but he saw himself in a different light to them. For  
>him it was natural, for them... For them, it was a lifestyle choice. <br>That was what Rei called it, and if he could not understand it, well,  
>they were not hurting him with it, so he would not hurt them about it.<br>  
>Gently placing her fingers on the mirror, Hotaru traced the outlines of <br>her face, no longer wondering who the woman was that drowned in the  
>spring to give her this body. She knew who she used to be, so much of <br>that was clear to her now. All that remained was to try and understand  
>who she was in the present.<br>  
>After he had explained everything to Haruka and Michiru, Ranma had gone <br>back to the temple with Rei. They had a spare room there, she had said,  
>you can stay as long as you like. He had almost taken her up on the <br>offer, but something stopped him. He had not been able to explain to  
>Rei why he had needed to go back to the Outers' home that night. Last <br>night he had again tried to tell her why he was staying there, but it  
>was not until this afternoon that he truly understood his own <br>motivation.  
><br>He loved Rei. Ranma knew that deep in his heart. He knew it with all  
>his soul. He also knew that she loved him, and that someday - when she <br>was ready - he would ask and they would be married. His not wanting to  
>live with her now had nothing to do with that at all. Certainly, he was <br>a little tense after four hundred years, but after waiting that long,  
>he could wait as long as she needed to be ready.<br>  
>This afternoon he realised that his motivation for staying here was not <br>from the love of a man and a woman, it was the love of a family. He

>might be four hundred years old, and he might have only lived with  
<br>Haruka and Michiru for the last four months, but he could  
remember them  
>all so clearly. Those four months were the most enjoyable months he  
<br>could remember since he had lived with Akane.  
><br>Living with the Outers was so simple, so pure. He loved them,  
and they  
>loved him. There were no secrets, no hiding who he was, no  
questionable <br>motivations. They were a family, with each and every  
person loving each  
>other. That was why he had to come back here. Not just for the pain  
<br>that his leaving would cause the girls, but for the pain it would  
cause  
>him. Their family was so perfect, to lose it would be a crime. <br>  
>What they once had was gone. There was no bringing it back. Not now,  
<br>not tomorrow, never. However, Ranma fervently believed that they  
could  
>make something else. Something different, but still good. It would  
need <br>work, care and nourishing, but he could see them becoming a  
family of  
>sorts again, maybe a similar sort of family to the Inner Senshi;  
Queen <br>Serenity had described them as being all sisters in some  
way. Ranma  
>knew that their efforts to make this new family would not be in  
vain. <br>Mixed with his other memories, they already had the basics,  
a level of  
>love and understanding that went beyond description: the love of a  
<br>little girl and her parents.  
><br>That was why he had reacted so violently when he received his  
memories  
>back. Something this perfect cannot exist, they told him. This much  
<br>happiness and love is just not possible. If it is not possible,  
and it  
>is not real, then it must have been a deliberate effort to deceive  
him. <br>That was what had hurt him the most, the memory of having  
something so  
>perfect, only to have it stolen away and shown as a deception.<br>  
>Even when he had found out the truth, he had still tried to deny it,  
<br>clinging to the comfortable reality that he was used to. To  
accept the  
>idea that he had just tried to kill his foster parents, to accept  
the <br>idea that he had caused so much pain to people who loved him;  
it was  
>almost too much to bear.<br>  
>Getting up from the bed, Hotaru began to undress. She kept a small  
<br>kettle in her bedroom, so warm water was always on hand. As  
Hotaru grew  
>into Ranma, he smirked and flexed his muscles; the mirror told him  
he <br>looked much better as a guy than a girl: check out those  
biceps!  
>Dragging a shirt over his head, Ranma began hunting around for a set  
of <br>pants that would fit him. He knew that he had put them here  
  
>somewhere...<br>  
>Family...<br>  
>Ranma liked that word. It rolled off the tongue, it said whole  
worlds <br>of information in just the one word. Family... Walking  
down the hall so

>he could get back to the kitchen, he reflected that 'family' was enough <br>reason in itself to stay here. Theirs was no ordinary family but it was  
>no less real.<br>  
>Like any family, they would have their disagreements; their ups and  
<br>downs. He felt like a lost relative coming back, a prodigal child  
  
>returning. He was confused about so many things, not the least of them <br>was his "parents". He knew so many conflicting facts about them, it was  
>hard to sort out what was right. Relying on his emotions was no better, <br>since he had blind desires to both kill them and trust them implicitly.  
>Just sorting out what he felt about them was something that would take <br>time, but it would be worth it in the end.  
><br>When he reached the kitchen, Haruka and Michiru were busy talking, so  
>he kept his footsteps light so as not to disturb. Before they both  
<br>realised what was happening, he gathered them into a hug and held on  
>tight. Holding the two women, he was pleasantly surprised when they not <br>only failed to flinch, but they returned the hug equally.  
Ranma was not  
>sure why he had done it, this was certainly the first time that he had <br>initiated any sort of emotional contact with them, but it felt right.  
><br>Even friends could hug each other, right?  
><br>As they stood in the kitchen, each held the other and understood better  
>how things were. Hotaru was no longer their daughter, and they were no <br>longer his parents. He was their daughter, their brother, their best  
>friend, their wise uncle and aunt all rolled into one. To him, they <br>were parents, friends, and equals. Age was not an issue; they were all  
>likely to live for longer than they would wish to count. His sex did <br>not matter; he changed it as easily as heating a cup of water.  
  
><br>What mattered was time, understanding, and love. They were a family,  
>and that was all they needed now. Time would lead to understanding, and <br>with understanding would come the love that they all desired. For now,  
>each would be content that they were together and working towards a <br>better future.  
><br>\* \* \*  
><br>Walking into the Hikawa Shrine, Ranma ruminated on how such simple  
>things could become so complex. Since Queen Serenity had needed her <br>Senshi form's speed to get to the Shrine last time, then staying that  
>way until she left the Outers' home, Ranma had never actually seen the <br>girl behind the disguise magic. To add to the confusion, when Hotaru  
>and Rei had been trying to explain things to the Outers initially, <br>there was so much concern over killing each other and Hotaru's survival  
>that Ranma's true form did not even rate a mention until after the <br>Queen left.  
><br>Knowing that he needed to decently introduce himself to his team

mates,

>Ranma had asked Rei to organise a meeting with the Inner Senshi.

<br>Surprisingly enough, it had been the fire Senshi herself that had

>recommended waiting an extra day. Looking back on it, Rei's suggestion <br>that he spend the day trying to understand his feelings for the Outers

>had been time well spent. He had reached an understanding now. He was <br>surer of himself, more in control now that his memories had had enough

>time to settle down and merge cleanly. <br>

>Of course, the Inners had reacted in a manner entirely predictable to <br>anyone who knew them. Even the studious Ami had insisted on a party for

>their newest member. Rei had not been forthcoming about Ranma's dual <br>identity, simply saying that Ranma was back in her life, and Sailor

>Saturn had recovered her memories. Sailor Mars was clearly enjoying <br>being the only one in possession of all the facts, and although she

>would never admit it to anyone, she could understand how omniscience <br>had easily become addictive to Sailor Pluto.

><br>"A party..." Ranma said as he walked into the shrine. He might have

>spent hardly any time here in the last four months, but he still <br>remembered every stone and every piece of wood.

><br>A slow smile brightened his face as he walked to the front door. "A

>party sounds just right." <br>

>When Rei slid the door open, she was wearing a very familiar red dress. <br>It was ankle length, and tight in all the right places. It showed

>nothing indecent, but somehow it seemed to offer the suggestion of <br>everything it went to such precise efforts to conceal.

><br>"Whoo... Ahh..." Ranma chuckled nervously for a moment. "I think that

>means I got the measurements right." <br>

>"Come here, you. You made me wait all day yesterday for this, so..." <br>Showing that she was the bolder of the two, Rei engulfed Ranma in a

>hug, holding him against her tightly. For four months she had learned <br>to live with her feelings, hoping that they would diminish in time,

>only to learn that they did not. Now she had Ranma back in her life, <br>she did not intend to lose him. If it meant that she needed to be open

>and honest about her feelings so that he would never be tempted to find <br>solace in Ukyo's or Makoto's or even Shampoo's arms, it was something

>she could easily live with. <br>

>Placing a hand softly on the side of her face, Ranma moved away from <br>her slightly. He moved slowly, sure and experienced in the arts of

>being with someone you loved. When he bent his head down, Rei looked up <br>at him and smiled, closing her eyes, losing herself in the warmth of

>his mouth and his love. The kiss was warm, tender and gentle. It was <br>not urgent or demanding; they had an eternity to explore their

>feelings. It was love, commitment, and companionship.<br>

>Breaking for air, Ranma again held Rei close to him. He smiled ruefully <br>when he noticed that they were still standing in her doorway, an open <br>spectacle for anyone that came to the shrine. Not that it mattered, of <br>course, but he liked to know when he was on display.

><br>"What time are the others coming?"

><br>Rei smiled even more, closing her eyes as she felt the deep, warm

>vibrations of his chest when he spoke. "Soon, I guess. I asked one of <br>them to be here three quarters of an hour early. Since that was thirty

>minutes ago, she should be here soon."<br>

>"So your saying we have time for another kiss?"<br>

>Rather than let words waste their precious moments, Rei simply tilted <br>her head back and let that be message enough. They were still in the

>doorway when a small cough caught their attention. Rei tried to back <br>away, but Ranma kept one arm around her waist as he turned to face the

>sound of the person who had arrived.<br>

>Usagi smiled at them and the politeness to blush and look slightly <br>abashed at having intruded. Chibi-Usa - who was standing next to her -

>just looked up at Ranma and Rei with wide eyed wonder. <br>

>"Umm... Sorry for interrupting guys, but we were sort of waiting here <br>for a while. I guess... heh, heh... you were a bit busy..."

><br>Then, before anyone could move, Usagi grabbed Rei's hand and dragged

>her off to the corner of the building. Getting a questioning look from <br>Ranma, Chibi-Usa just shrugged. She had no idea what her mother was up

>to most of the time, why should now be any different?<br>

>"Rei!" Usagi whispered fiercely. "What is he doing here? We have to <br>get rid of him! We can't have him around when Sailor Saturn gets here

>and we do introductions, even if he is your boyfriend."<br>

>Rei smirked, knowing she would enjoy every last moment of this.

Taking <br>Usagi's hand, she pulled the shorter girl back towards the other two.

>In a voice loud enough to be heard by all of them, Rei pushed Usagi <br>forwards and introduced her.

><br>"Now, may I present her most Imperial Highness, Queen Serenity! Or

>Sailor Moon as we usually call her."<br>

>Stumbling slightly, Usagi turned around and gave Rei a quick glare <br>before she tried to babble her way out of the revelation. Before she

>managed to say "Well, you see, that is, I..." Ranma had already <br>reacted.

><br>Stumbling backwards, slightly, Ranma pointed a shaky finger between the

>girls. "You're saying Usagi is Queen Serenity?! What? Next you're <br>gunna say that Chibi-Usa is really Sailor Moon!"

><br>To his eternal horror, Rei's Cheshire Cat grin grew even broader as she



>nodded her head. Ranma was still staring between each girl trying to  
<br>understand something he would have deemed impossible just a few  
minutes  
>ago. Usagi was a ditz, a bubble headed definition of the word  
"blonde"; <br>she must have been about as far from the heroic and  
poised Queen  
>Serenity as he could imagine. <br>  
>It was at that moment that Rei's other close friends also chose to  
walk <br>up. Three other girls, each bearing a close resemblance to  
the Sailor  
>Senshi. Because of the effect of the disguise magic, he was not  
<br>certain, but he could feel a settling in his stomach. Their  
timing was  
>right, they were always with Rei, and she was Sailor Mars. Added to  
the <br>fact that the fastidiously honest Hino Rei had just fingered  
two of the  
>girls as being Sailor Senshi...<br>  
>"Sailors Jupiter, Mercury and Venus, I presume?"<br>  
>The three girls had their arms full with food, so they did not try  
and <br>attack her physically, but their collective gaze was so cold  
it could  
>have frozen a lake. "Rei-chan, I know he's your boyfriend, but how  
<br>could you tell him?"  
><br>Smiling so much she thought that her face would split, Rei turned  
  
>slightly and gestured at Ranma. "I'm sorry, Ami-chan. May I present  
<br>Saturn Knight?"  
><br>After months of being "poor Rei-chan, whose boyfriend ran away",  
she  
>was enjoying her moment of triumph out of proportion. Despite that,  
Rei <br>loved being a showman. The flash, the ceremony, the ability  
to pull  
>facts out of thin air. Knowing what everyone else was only guessing  
at <br>made things so much fun. It was like revealing the truth of a  
fire  
>reading, but here there was no doubt or confusion and none of the  
<br>tiredness that came with the effort of trying to read the future.  
  
><br>With Ranma being a little slow on the uptake, Rei gave him a  
nudge with  
>her elbow. Shaking himself out of his stunned state, Ranma moved  
away <br>slightly and brought on his power. With his reawakening two  
days ago,  
>he had full control over his powers, allowing him to become Saturn  
<br>Knight or Sailor Saturn at will. With neither fuss nor fanfare,  
his  
>ordinary clothes vanished, swirling softly into the mask, formal  
suit <br>and cape that was the trademark of the Knights of the Moon  
Kingdom.  
><br>Hushed awe came from all around. Suddenly, everything was clear  
to the  
>Inners. They were not just here to meet Sailor Saturn, they were  
here <br>to meet the whole family. Now that they had seen it, Ranma's  
revelation  
>made sense. It was obvious that all of the royalty from Saturn would  
be <br>reincarnated into the same family, making Ranma and Hotaru,  
brother and  
>sister. It also meant that...<br>  
>Ranma smile matched Rei's as they watched understanding wash over  
<br>everyone's faces. Everyone was just as easy to read as their

memories

>slowly brought another fact to the fore, bursting the bubble of their <br>joy. Saturn Knight was royalty by marriage. The man in the cape

>standing next to Rei was the destined husband of his own sister, the <br>little girl they knew as Hotaru.

><br>Just as quick on the uptake as everyone else, Chibi-Usa was the first

>to speak, and she voiced the thought that they all shared. "Ewww. <br>That's icky! She's his sister!"

><br>Rei could not hold in her mirth any longer, and before she knew what

>had happened, Ranma had caught her in his strong arms as her body-<br>shaking laughter stole her balance. When Ranma placed her on a small

>seat, she placed a hand on his arm in thanks, but even then she could <br>not laughing. With tears of joy streaming from her eyes, it took two

>tries to get the words out, but the effort was worth it.<br>

>"But then again..."<br>

>With a fond look down at Rei, Saturn Knight grasped the Silence Glaive <br>firmly in his hand. With a sly wink and a nod of his head, Ranma again

>activated his magic. Rather than the pomp and flash of a normal Senshi <br>transformation, Ranma was better versed in the ways of magic. His

>transformation was purely physical, since his other normal forms - <br>male, female or Saturn Knight - still had access to the full Senshi

>magic.<br>

>Before their eyes, the assembled Inner Senshi were treated to the sight <br>only one person had ever seen before. Weight and years slipped from

>Ranma like water from an ice statue in the hot sun. His black clothes <br>shrunk across most of the body, changing to a white bodysuit and dark

>skirt that left no question as to the sex of the wearer. <br>

>Looking like a recruiting poster for a legion of magical girls, Sailor <br>Saturn stood there grinning from ear to ear. Her enjoyment of the

>stunned looking girls ended quite suddenly when she felt Chibi-Usa's <br>little fist beat into her side.

><br>"Hotaru!" She burst out, sounding betrayed. "How could you do that to

>me? I thought you were my best friend. I thought your liked me. How <br>could you lie to me all that time? How could you pretend to be Hotaru,

>pretend to be my best friend in the whole world when it was all a lie? <br>How could you say you were Hotaru when you were really Ranma? It's...

>It's not fair!"<br>

>Releasing the Silence Glaive to go back into storage, Sailor Saturn <br>turned and gathered the reluctant Chibi-Usa into a hug. Although her

>friend was obviously not keen on letting Saturn hold onto her, she was <br>not able to escape, as the Senshi held her firmly but gently. Leaning

>her head on her little friend's shoulder, Hotaru spoke in a voice <br>choked with emotion.

><br>"It wasn't pretend, Chibi-Usa. None of it ever was. Sometimes...

>Sometimes I might have thought I was pretending to be a girl, but I  
<br>wasn't. I know that now. I... I've always been Sailor Saturn,  
just like

>Rei was always Sailor Mars, even before she realised it. Ever since  
I <br>was born, all those years ago, I've always been Sailor Saturn,  
just

>like I was Saturn Knight."<br>

>"It's not that, not much," the pink haired girl countered. "I... I  
can <br>understand that, but... But why did you have to pretend to be  
my

>friend?"<br>

>"I never had to pretend that, Chibi-Usa. Not once, not even for a  
<br>single second. When I first got to Tokyo, I didn't have any  
friends.

>When I started being Tomoe Hotaru, you were the first person to be  
nice <br>to me that whole time. I like you Chibi-Usa. You're my  
friend, my very,

>very special friend. Never, ever forget that."<br>

>"But... But I'm just a little girl. Rei-san told us that you were  
four-<br>hundred years old. You must be so smart, and know so much.  
I'm just a

>little girl, how can you say your friends with someone like me? Your  
so <br>much better than I am, you know so much more."

><br>Standing back, Hotaru placed her hands on her friend's shoulders  
and

>looked into Chibi-Usa's hurt and confused eyes and tried to make her  
<br>understand. "Just because I'm older than you are, doesn't mean I  
can't

>be your friend. I like you for who you are. Not for what you know,  
or <br>anything else. You're a really, really nice person, Chibi-Usa.  
I like

>you a lot. I never wanted to hurt you or pretend to be something I  
<br>wasn't, but... But back then I wanted to be cured, I just wanted  
to be

>normal Ranma, to have normal friends like you and Rei and everyone  
<br>else. That's why I never told you the truth about myself. I... I  
was

>afraid of what you would think. I was afraid you wouldn't like me  
<br>anymore if you found out I was really four hundred years old and  
turned

>into a boy.<br>"I... I'm sorry, Chibi-Usa."

><br>Blinking her big, pink eyes several times, Chibi-Usa fought to  
come to

>grips with what she had just learned. When she saw him transform,  
she <br>had been certain that Ranma was just pretending to be the  
nice little

>girl that Chibi-Usa had called Hotaru, her friend. Making a  
decision, <br>Chibi-Usa lunged forwards and caught the slightly  
taller girl in an

>embrace. <br>

>"You're still my friend?"<br>

>"Always. I'll always be your friend, Chibi-Usa. Always. And I'll  
never <br>hide anything from you again."

><br>After a time, Sailor Saturn looked up and noticed all of the  
other

>girls standing around. Although they had not been as close as  
Chibi-Usa <br>and Hotaru or Ranma and Rei, they were all friends to  
some degree or

>another. Although accomplished at hiding secrets from the world  
<br>themselves, it came as a shock when you realised that someone you  
knew  
>and liked had been hiding something as big as this.<br>  
>Listening to Sailor Saturn's, Ranma's, explanation to Chibi-Usa, the  
<br>girls began to understand that what she said, she not only meant  
for  
>Chibi-Usa, she meant for all of them. It must have been hard for  
<br>someone like Ranma, trying to adapt to life in Tokyo after so  
long  
>away. Just being able to meet people and speak with them as friends  
<br>must have been worth almost any sacrifice. If that meant hiding  
who you  
>were, and sometimes lying to them a little... Was it really any  
<br>different than when they told someone that they did not know who  
the  
>Sailor Senshi were?<br>  
>Usagi was the first to move as she stepped forward from the ring of  
<br>girls. Putting her arms around Sailor Saturn and her daughter,  
she  
>tried to make them feel the same understanding that she felt, feel  
the <br>same love and hope that she did. "Welcome home, Hotaru.  
Welcome to the  
>team."<br>  
>As though a signal, Usagi's words spurred everyone else into action.  
In <br>no time, all the girls were cheering crying and joining in the  
general  
>feeling of happiness and reunion. Taking their time, Saturn hugged,  
<br>cried and laughed with each of the girls, sharing in their good  
wishes,  
>and their acceptance into their special team of people. <br>  
  
>Makoto was the last in line, but it was an attempt to ensure she  
would <br>have the longest, rather than any reluctance. Having just  
released the  
>bubbly, enthusiastic Minako, Hotaru turned to find Makoto kneeling  
next <br>to her, sweeping her into an embrace as tight and desperate  
as the one  
>she had shared with Chibi-Usa. <br>  
>Feeling tears on her shoulders, Hotaru knew that there was nothing  
she <br>could say to ease things with Makoto. In the same way that  
Chibi-Usa  
>had been Hotaru's special friend, Makoto had claimed a special place  
in <br>Ranma's heart. Not the same place that Rei and Sailor Mars  
held, but  
>the place of a friend, a companion, someone you could trust and rely  
<br>on.  
><br>"I... I'm sorry, Mako-chan."  
><br>"Don't... Don't say you're sorry. We both know that it couldn't  
have  
>worked out. But... But it was nice to pretend, even... even if I  
sort <br>of knew from the beginning that I couldn't have ever gotten  
Ranma.  
>Would... Would you be able to change back? To become him again?"<br>  
  
>Concentrating, Hotaru triggered the magic in herself, growing  
greatly <br>to become a martial artist they all recognised. Water  
still triggered  
>his "curse", but with effort, he could start it himself, changing  
sexes <br>if he needed to. It was not easy, but it was a lot more

convenient that  
>needing a glass of hot water. Especially if you happen to be holding  
<br>onto someone at the same time. Still holding onto Makoto as he  
changed,  
>Ranma drew her to her feet, so that her head rested on his firm  
chest, <br>and her arms now encircled his well muscled form.

><br>"It feels... It feels so nice to hold you like this, Ranma. Just  
like I  
>always imagined it would."<br>  
>"Hey... Mako-chan. It's OK, you don't have to be sad."<br>  
>She murmured her assent, but Ranma could tell that her heart was not  
in <br>it. "It's true, Mako-chan. You've got a long, long time. I'm  
sure  
>you're going to find the right guy, it's just time. And that's  
<br>something you have plenty of. We all do. I had to wait three  
hundred  
>and fifty years to find Rei-chan, but I'm sure you can do it much  
<br>faster, especially with the rest of us helping."  
><br>Blinking tears out of her eyes, Makoto look at the man she had  
been  
>pursuing so adamantly and wondered if he was right. Was she chasing  
him <br>because of who he was, or because of who she wanted him to  
be? Maybe  
>she had been deceiving herself, thinking that Ranma returned her  
love. <br>Maybe even that had been an illusion to, she thought as she  
realised  
>just how little it had hurt when she realised she had lost him.  
Unlike <br>Rei, Makoto had gone on with her life, hunting other boys.  
Ranma had  
>been... a dream, nothing more really. An awfully nice dream, she  
<br>realised, but just a dream. The right man for her was still out  
there,  
>still waiting to be found.<br>  
>"If you could finish pawing my boyfriend," an acidic voice came from  
<br>beside her. "Then perhaps we could go inside and start setting up  
some  
>of this food."<br>  
>Blushing all the way to the roots of her hair, Makoto jumped away  
from <br>Ranma, realising that Rei was right. In her entranced,  
thoughtful  
>state, she had accidentally let her hands wander, and well, Ranma  
<br>looked to be as embarrassed as she was. Not to mention that the  
other  
>Senshi all were doing their best to look in another direction. Of  
<br>course, Ranma did have a very nice butt.  
><br>"Sorry, Rei-chan."  
><br>"That's OK, Mako-chan." The fire Senshi and mistress of the  
shrine  
>replied as she slipped an arm around said boyfriend. "I've know I  
can <br>trust you, and I'm beginning to understand that I can trust  
this idiot  
>too."<br>  
>Ranma beamed at them, running an hand under the silken black hair  
that <br>cascaded down Rei's back to run a tickling finger across her  
spine.  
>"And who were you calling an idiot, tomboy?"<br>  
>"Oh? A tomboy, am I?" Rei queried and she retaliated, seeking to  
tickle <br>his vulnerable ribs.  
><br>"Um?... Guys?... The food?" This time it was Rei and Ranma's

turn to  
>look embarrassed. Nodding, they separated, and picked up some of the  
<br>bundles of food that the arriving girls had brought, helping to  
bring  
>it into the house. Rei had prepared things there for an evening of  
<br>talking and eating, but the others had gone a long way to  
providing the  
>snacks that they would need to keep a crowd of hungry teenagers fed,  
<br>especially when that group contained a pair of motor-mouths like  
Ranma  
>and Usagi.<br>  
>Once they had the food safely in the kitchen, sure that the  
<br>refrigerated food would not melt or run, Ami broached the  
question that  
>must have been on so many of their minds. "Ranma-san... If you don't  
<br>mind... What was it like? When you grew up? What have you really  
been  
>doing all this time?"<br>  
>Picking up a piece of celery and crunching on it, Ranma wondered  
where <br>to start. It did not take long for him to decided the best  
place, and  
>he smiled as he had his first chance to relate this to a group of  
<br>friends in many, many years.  
><br>"When I was little, my father took me on a great training  
journey, to  
>make me the greatest practitioner of Anything Goes Martial Arts in  
the <br>world. You have to remember, this was a long time ago, and  
people took  
>this sort of fighting much more seriously then. We did not really  
have <br>guns in Japan then, it was fists and blades that made up  
armies.  
>"Anything Goes was the greatest form of martial arts in Japan in  
that <br>era. My father was one of the two great masters at that  
stage, and he  
>and his friend used to train people for the Shogun, creating the  
<br>soldiers that would defend his life and protect the people of our  
great  
>nation.<br>"One day, before I was even born, Pop and his friend got  
this idea into  
>their head about assuring the continuance of the School, of making  
the <br>next generation even better than this one. Well, I was about  
sixteen  
>when I first met Tendo Akane and---"<br>  
>It was not a story that could be told quickly, nor could it be told  
<br>simply. By the time two hours had passed Ranma was still talking  
about  
>the time that he and Akane had been called to Kyoto to personally  
face <br>the challenge offered by the then-High Warlord of the  
Shogun. Although  
>quiet compared to his current life, the days of his youth with Akane  
<br>would not be considered quiet by any normal standards. The  
Senshi's  
>lives were hardly normal, but by comparison to what they were  
learning <br>about Ranma, they seemed staid and dull.  
><br>As it was approaching full dark outside the shrine, a quiet but  
firm  
>knock could be heard. Excusing herself from the party, Rei went to  
<br>open the door, only to return shortly with a pair of tall,  
smiling  
>women. Gracing the Inners with their presence, Haruka and Michiru

waved <br>hello and laid out another couple of plates of food.

><br>Amidst a chorus of greetings and well wishing, Haruka claimed a couple

>of spaces on some cushions, and Michiru loaded up a plate with some  
<br>finger food for them to share. Since Ranma was still in his male form,

>everyone watched with some nervousness as the girls said hello to him. <br>As far as most of them knew, the last time that Ranma and the Outers

>had met had been when he had been Saturn Knight, their mortal enemy. <br>After all, it was easy to forget that in a different shape, Ranma had

>really been their adopted daughter for the last few months.<br>

>Noticing the tension in the room, Michiru smiled and placed a hand on <br>Ranma's arm. "It's all right, everyone. Ranma and us... We've worked

>things out."<br>

>Aside from Rei - who was aware that Ranma was living with the Outers <br>and generally feeling well disposed to them - Ami was the first to

>understand. Placing a hand over her mouth, Ami let out a delicate <br>little laugh. "Oh! That's right! Ranma is Hotaru-chan and... Oh my,

>Ranma. Whatever was it like for you? Can you remember what it was like <br>when you were a little girl?"

><br>Smiling around one of the dumplings Michiru had brought, Ranma nodded

>solemnly, or as solemnly as possible while stuffing your face.

"Gulp! <br>Actually, Ami-chan. That's sort of the main reason we're all here

>today. It, sort of got pretty messy for a while."<br>

>"What happened? Usagi told us that Sailor Saturn was back and <br>threatened to hurt Michiru-san and Haruka-san. I was so surprised, I

>dropped the book I was reading. Hotaru-chan always loved her parents so <br>much."

><br>Looking embarrassed, Ranma faced away from the studious girl.

"I... I'd

>rather not talk about it. It wasn't exactly one of my best moments, and <br>well..."

><br>Ranma trailed off, and for a while the silence stretched.

Everyone was

>wondering about a graceful way of ending the difficult moment when <br>Usagi managed to stick her foot in it, and end the problem completely.

>"And what about Setsuna-san? I thought she'd be here if anyone was. You <br>didn't do anything to her, did you?"

><br>"Yeah," the other Senshi with long blonde hair added. "You were pretty

>mad at her last time I saw you. Usagi-chan couldn't stop talking about <br>that thing you did with the Glaive at the top of Mugen Academy's tower

>for weeks afterwards."<br>

>"Well... I sort of went for a look for her and then we---"<br>

>"---We talked about it. Didn't we, Ranma?" A frosty voice from the <br>doorway interrupted him and completed his sentence."

><br>"Umm... Yeah... Talked about it..." Ranma looked confused for a moment,  
>then gave the dark haired Senshi standing in the doorway a cheeky  
<br>smile. "Same way I talked to---"  
><br>"---Yes. Well. I came. I was at the party. Now, if you will excuse me,  
>I will be going home. Goodnight." With a short, sharp nod, Setsuna  
<br>turned on her heel and walked out the door. The entire time she had  
>been there, her face had shown no emotion, but the mask she wore was a  
<br>different one from the expressionless mask she usually effected.  
>Tonight it was a hard, rigid shield, holding back some obviously fierce  
<br>emotion.  
><br>"Wow. I've never seen Setsuna act like that before." Makoto began.  
>"What did you say to her."<br>  
>Ranma shrugged nonchalantly and reached for sweet bun sitting near his  
<br>queen. "Not much..." Chomp!... "You didn't want that, did you, Usagi-  
>chan?"<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>It had happened yesterday. An epiphany, a feeling of complete  
<br>understanding.  
><br>Ranma had awoken that day, resolving that it was a day to be spent  
>ironing things out with her new housemate. Lying there in bed - as a  
<br>girl since Ranma was more used to sleeping that way - Ranma had  
  
>reflected on Rei's advice to him as he said goodbye to her at the foot  
<br>of her shrine. "Talk to them." She had said. "Listen to them."  
><br>Since they had been up until almost three AM last night, it was late  
>when Ranma got out of bed, almost seven thirty. Most people might not  
<br>regard that as very late, but Ranma was used to waking around four in  
>the morning for a jog and a workout. This morning felt odd without the  
<br>workout, but the time spent with Michiru and Haruka last night had been  
>worth it. She was not sure just how she felt about them yet, but she  
<br>knew she was more certain than she had been just hours before. She also  
>realised that there was so much they had all misunderstood for so long.<br>  
>Sitting on the end of her bed, Ranma tried to think of all the things  
<br>she needed to get done that day. There was Michiru and Haruka of  
>course, and they would be first, by dint of the fact that would share  
<br>her breakfast with them. Then there was Setsuna, the so-called Guardian  
>Of Time. The name itself was enough to make Ranma give a most ungirlish  
<br>snort of derision. Guardian Of Time, her cute little butt! Anyone  
>having access to the Gates Of Time was asking for trouble, and trouble  
<br>was something that Ranma could do without for a while.  
  
><br>What could she do about it, though? She was here, potent and dangerous  
>to be sure, but there was no way that she could get in contact with



<br>Setsuna unless the elusive Senshi wished it. She needed to find Setsuna  
>and stop her. The Gates Of Time were not supposed to be in the  
<br>possession of any one person. No matter what Queen Serenity might say  
>on the subject.<br>  
>Just thinking about the problem like that seemed to bring its own  
<br>solution. A solution so full blown and perfect, Ranma knew that it  
>could not have been her own. An instant after considering the  
<br>possibility of how to stop someone with access to the Gates Of Time and  
>how to close down that access, Ranma had the answer. That sort of ease  
<br>spoke of interference, and the sorts of spells Ranma suddenly knew  
>spoke of Lina Inverse.<br>  
>Ranma might have deeply respected his ancient teacher of magic, but he  
<br>could not help groaning slightly at what Lina had done. He could  
>understand why Lina would go to such measures to ensure that no-one  
<br>knew how to get to the Gates, but it was frustrating to realise that  
>she had embedded such important information in his subconscious without  
<br>even giving him a hint.  
><br>What Lina had done was provide him everything he needed. Without doubt,  
>Ranma now understood exactly what he needed to do. With no more effort  
<br>than changing into his Senshi form, Ranma would be capable of  
>transiting to the Gates Of Time. By that simple spell - and with really  
<br>was incredibly easy once you knew it - Ranma could follow Setsuna  
>wherever she might flee. In essence, because Ranma had been  
<br>concentrating on how to find a threat to the human race that had fled  
>to the Gates, she had opened the door on a whole new swath of memories  
<br>and magic.  
><br>Apparently, some time when she had been training with Lina all those  
>many decades ago, the Sorceress had taught him everything she knew  
<br>about time travel and the Gates. Then, she had sealed it all. Perhaps  
>that was another reason that Lina had not taught him a large quantity  
<br>of White magic, since it would not have taken a great healing spell to  
>break the seal Lina had put on the knowledge. On the other hand,  
<br>without the proper thought trigger or external influence, Ranma would  
>never have known she had access to the Gates Of Time. <br>  
>Temptation. That was what it all came down to. Temptation. After all  
<br>this time of seeing her own faults, Ranma was quite capable of  
  
>admitting she was not perfect. True, she was better than everyone else,  
<br>and probably closer to perfect than anyone else she knew, but she was  
>still subject to temptation. Lina had known that Ranma might have been  
<br>effectively immortal, and that over the centuries, the desire to use  
>the Gates would have become greater each and every day. As the

burden  
of living in isolation grew, so would the desire to go back and change  
the one thing that had tarnished so much of her life. Jusenkyo.

Giving into that enticement would have been enough to cause an  
irrevocable, and possibly unrecoverable, paradox. The world would have

been shattered on the anvil of causality, and it would have been her  
fault for teaching him about the Gates Of Time.

All that had changed when Ranma had been thinking about a villainous

fugitive that had fled to the Gates as sanctuary. This was a threat  
that was greater than Ranma's temptation. A threat more dire and needy

that the risk he presented. True, he might still go mad in time, but  
Lina had included a treat to help him with that too.

Now that she knew she could find Setsuna - or Sailor Pluto as she

probably would rather be called - it was time for something more  
pressing: breakfast. Not having eaten since early yesterday on the way

to Rei's, Ranma's stomach was growling like a panda awaking from  
hibernation, and Ranma had first hand experience with how that sounded.

Making up a tray of miso, rice, fish, bread, coffee, tea, rolls and

some other assortments that she had found in the fridge, Ranma laid out  
the table. She could have done it quietly enough to ensure she would be

able to eat undisturbed, but she wanted company. Too many things had  
remained unsaid last night, and she wanted to say them now, to be able

to think about them as she went off to face this challenge today.  
More importantly, if anything today was going to cause her to work out some

frustrations on Sailor Pluto, Ranma knew that it would be her next  
meeting with the women posing as her parents.

She was right in many ways. When Haruka and Michiru first came down,

they instinctively treated Hotaru as the same girl she had been two  
days ago. That ended quite quickly when Ranma stated point blank that

she would not tolerate it, but things got progressively better after  
that. She might not have chosen them as her friends initially, but

Ranma was forced to admit that when you were not trying to rip each  
other throats out, the girls could be quite decent company.

Around eleven, Ranma packed up the breakfast dishes and accepted

Michiru's offer to clean them. When she told the tall, blonde, boyish  
Senshi that she was going for a walk, Haruka had quickly offered to

join her, but Ranma had demurred. She did not intend to tell anyone  
that she had access to the Gates, so visiting Setsuna would have to be

a private venture.

Out of the house, down the road, over the hill and in the park, Ranma  
hid behind a tree. She knew no-one had followed her. Not only did she

>have great evasion skills, but she had inherited an enormous level of <br>trust from her time as a girl in the Outers' care. Michiru and Haruka  
>had said they would let her do what she wanted undisturbed, and she <br>believed them. Intellectually, her older memories made her rile against  
>the blind trust buried in her heart, but she understood that it was <br>real, and they deserved it.  
><br>The reason Hotaru - what was a name other than a convenient way to  
>label the body - hid behind the tree was privacy from others who might <br>stumble through her section of the park by accident.  
Changing to Sailor  
>Saturn was not the concern it was for her that it was for the other <br>girls, but even then she took care with her secret.  
><br>In a short, unimpressive sequence, a small dark haired girl in a dark  
>skirt and deep green blouse became the Senshi of Creation and <br>Destruction, Sailor Saturn. In less time than it took to say "Oh my  
>goodness, Sailor Saturn is going to beat up Sailor Pluto", the small <br>Senshi vanished, moving into the time stream as only a select few  
  
>could.<br>  
>Thick white fog surrounded Sailor Saturn in every direction she looked. <br>The indefinable otherwhere that was home to the Gates Of Time. The  
>ultimate magical object to have ever been created by the human race. A <br>device so powerful, it even rivalled the invidious Mazoku.  
Speaking of  
>which, it should be around here somewhere.<br>  
>Turning and walking felt funny in the semi-lit internal luminescence of <br>the fog. There was no sun here, so there was also no sunlight. Nor was  
>there any lamps, torches or electric light. Here, light just \_was\_. In <br>the same way that the fog \_was\_. It existed in this place where nothing  
>else did, and that existence provided its own substance of reality. <br>  
>There was no set direction to move, just forward, toward the Gates. <br>That was the only way you could move here, even if you did not know  
>where the Gates Of Time actually were. Towards or away. Pick a <br>direction, any direction, and that could be towards them, since they  
>were the only thing here. If that basic concept was confusing and gave <br>you headaches, you had no business messing with something as delicate  
>as time travel.<br>  
>"You!"<br>  
>Sailor Pluto's hate filled shout brought Saturn's head around to face <br>her. There she was, tall, elegant, and very, very angry.  
Striding  
>through the fog, she advanced to meet Saturn as the smallest Senshi <br>finally drew close enough to the Gates themselves. How you can draw  
>closer to something that was more a concept than a physical item was up <br>for debate, but Saturn knew she was almost at the Gates. At this  
>distance, she could feel their power, seductive and alluring, just

as <br>Lina had described it.

><br>"It's me. And I'm here to shut you down."

><br>Planting her feet wide, Pluto held the Key to the Gates Of Time like a

>staff. Light rolled off the massive garnet set into the top of it, and <br>Saturn could almost feel the hatred emanate from the otherwise composed

>woman. "I've guarded these Gates for thousands of years, and only three <br>times have I failed. I shall not fall to someone like you."

><br>Planting the Silence Glaive into the ground beside her, Saturn sized up

>the bigger woman. Was there any chance of talking her into submission? <br>This was Pluto's ground much more than it was Saturn's, and she did not

>really want to fight if she did not need to. "Three times? I though <br>Queen Serenity said it was only twice."

><br>Briefly, pain and shame twisted their way across the Time Senshi's

>features, but resolution and anger finally crowded them out. "Three. <br>Chibi-Usa was an accident, and she hasn't done anything wrong. The Dark

>Moon Family was a mistake, but we managed to stop them before anything <br>serious happened."

><br>"That's two. What was the third?"

><br>"You would not remember the Mil-Cothans and their beautiful floating

>cities. Long before the rise of the modern nations, I watched from <br>here. The Mil-Cothans... discovered the Gates. I could not stop them

>when the sent an army in here, and look what happened. They managed to <br>keep me from my duty as Guardian Of The Gates Of Time for less than a

>month, and now they are no more. Not even a memory of them remains in <br>any mind but my own. Erased from the universe by their own greed and

>foolishness.<br>"The time paradox they created wiped themselves and their entire

>existence from history. Nothing remained, nothing at all. No people, no <br>cities, none of their great literary works. Even the name of their

>people is only known by myself. Everything else... never existed.<br>"I will not allow you to do the same!"

><br>With a determined yell, Sailor Pluto ran forwards and swung the Time

>Staff in a great wide sweep. Rather than dodging, Sailor Saturn tried <br>to catch the weapon, seeking to disarm her opponent and end the battle

>quickly. What did not expect was the strength of the blow. Rather than <br>being parried and diverted from its course, the key shaped Staff

>continued inexorably through its arc, catching Saturn in the stomach, <br>and hefting her backwards.

><br>Gasping in pain, Saturn made herself roll to the side. Gods! That thing

>was heavy, but Pluto wielded it so easily! The blow she had taken felt <br>worse than anything Ryoga had ever landed, and if it was not for the

>additional magical armour provided by her Senshi form, Saturn was sure <br>that each and every one of her ribs would have been broken.

As it was,  
>she could barely stand in time as Pluto brought the Key in for an  
<br>overhead swing, designed to catch the girl as she tried to get  
up.  
><br>"I shall not lose this time! Ahh!"  
><br>Pluto yelled in anger as she again swung at her adversary.  
Rather than  
>try to parry this time, Saturn tried to take advantage of the  
thought <br>that the Staff must be truly massive to afford such a  
wallop.  
>Unfortunately, Pluto managed to reverse direction with unbelievable  
<br>ease and caught Saturn on the temple with a light tap just as the  
girl  
>was beginning her Amaguriken attack. <br>  
>While Saturn's speed punching was sufficient to knock the tall woman  
<br>back several steps with even just a few blows, the feather light  
tap of  
>the Staff was almost enough to lift off Saturn's skull. Neck  
<br>complaining miserably, Saturn felt the side of her head from  
where she  
>lay on the ground, several metres away at the end of her flight. She  
<br>was amazed to discover that the only thing that seemed to have  
kept her  
>brains from leaking out all over the end of the Staff was her now  
<br>heavily dented tiara.  
><br>"Wh- What the heck is that thing?"  
><br>Smirking, Pluto advanced again, warily, but with confidence.  
"This is  
>the Key. The Key to the Gates Of Time. In this whole place, there  
are <br>only two things that are really, honestly \_here\_. This Key,  
and the  
>Gates themselves. While I hold the Key, you cannot take it from my  
<br>hands, nor can you stop it."  
><br>When she got close enough, Pluto began striking at Saturn again,  
but  
>the smaller girl back-pedalled furiously, dodging the potentially  
<br>lethal strikes. "It is nothing dangerous, but it is anchored to  
reality  
>in ways you cannot begin to comprehend. In normal time, it is  
nothing <br>more than a staff, but here, it is indestructible and  
invincible.  
>Frankly, I'm surprised that you managed to survive either of those  
<br>blows. I've split plate armour with a single hit, and I'll split  
you  
>too!"<br>  
>Anger was making Pluto faster, but it was also making her sloppier.  
<br>That invincible weapon made a very difficult target, and were it  
not  
>for Saturn's substantial martial skills, she would have been a stain  
in <br>the mists of time long ago. Finally, Pluto over-extended just  
a touch  
>too far. Not even her Senshi enhanced speed would allow her to bring  
<br>back that crushing weapon in time to stop Sailor Saturn's attack.  
  
><br>Clear purple eyes narrowed in concentration and determination,  
Saturn  
>launched herself inside Pluto's guard, catching the woman with a  
<br>staggering series of blows, to send her reeling and flailing.  
  
>Deliberately letting her adversary get a grip on herself, Saturn

stayed <br>away for a time.

><br>"It doesn't have to be this way, Pluto. We're on the same side. You

>don't have to fight me!"<br>

>"No! Your small mind cannot begin to comprehend the powers of the  
<br>Gates. None but I may have access, for only I have withstood the

>temptation they pose. I alone can guard the Gates. I alone!"<br>

>Dodging another series of increasingly frenetic attacks, Saturn  
<br>persisted. "I don't want the Gates. No-one should have them.  
Please, we

>have to stop this!"<br>

>"Never! I will never surrender their power to you!"<br>

>Reluctant to grievously injure the woman she knew was a friend and  
ally <br>of her queen, Saturn spun under a sweeping horizontal strike  
that would

>have left her a foot shorter if it connected. Moving with a speed  
that <br>almost blurred in the mists, Saturn was past and behind  
Pluto before

>the woman could react. A short jump placed the young girl on Pluto's  
<br>back, and she wrapped the larger woman in a sealing embrace  
almost

>instantly.<br>

>With Saturn's leg's around her waist and her small, unreasonably  
strong <br>arms hooked under Pluto's armpits to immobilise the  
Senshi's arms,

>Saturn was faced with a mouth full of green hair, but was otherwise  
<br>safe. Pluto could do nothing but walk around, and in this empty

>vastness, there was nothing but themselves and the Gates to use as  
<br>weapons. As desperate as they might be, neither even considered  
using

>the Gates Of Time as a weapon in their fight. Beating Saturn against  
<br>their stone arches might have loosened her grip, but Pluto knew  
that

>the risks of such an action were enormous.<br>

>"Let! Me! Go!" Pluto fumed through clenched teeth as she struggled  
<br>against Saturn.

><br>"No! I'm doing this for your own good. I have to seal the Gates  
before

>something happens, something we'll never know to regret."<br>

>"No! I cannot fail! I have withstood them for so long, I shall  
defend <br>them forever! I have seen the future! I know that I alone  
stand

>Guardian over the Gates Of Time!"<br>

>That was enough to shake the little Senshi. She could tell be the  
<br>frantic honesty in Pluto's voice that this was the truth. Plain  
and

>simple, Pluto had told her that she could not win, that somehow,  
<br>someday, Pluto would again stand watch over the Gates, would  
again have

>control over their fearsome power.<br>

>The shock of that terrifying revelation was enough to distract  
Saturn <br>for a crucial moment. Although she never slackened her  
grip on Pluto,

>she did not notice it as the woman let the Time Staff, Key to the  
<br>Gates, slip lightly through her fingers until she held it much  
nearer

>the end. All she could manage was a slight twist of her wrist, but  
it <br>was enough. Enough to send the unstoppable Time Staff bumping  
into  
>Saturn's right thigh.<br>  
>With a scream of agony, Saturn released Pluto and fell to the  
ground. <br>Her leg was bent at a horrible angle, and tears blurred  
her vision.  
>So... This was how it ended. She was going to lose to Pluto. Maybe  
<br>Pluto was really the Time Senshi. She had said that she had seen  
her  
>future, and her future was at the Gates. Pluto alone would hold the  
<br>power of time...  
><br>Time...  
><br>Pluto stood above the small girl, a manic look of glee on her  
face as  
>she raised the Time Staff...<br>  
>Time...<br>  
>Yet another block faded from Saturn's mind. An unfurling of secrets  
<br>best left hidden...  
><br>Time...  
><br>That fate Key began to descent, terribly, horribly fast to  
Saturn's  
>pain wracked senses...<br>  
>Time...<br>  
>"DARK DOME: ENCLOSE!"<br>  
>From her position on the ground, surrounded by slowly curling mists,  
<br>Sailor Saturn looked up at the featureless black sphere in front  
of  
>her. Previously known only to one other person alive, the Dark Dome  
<br>Enclose was Sailor Pluto's most potent weapon. With the power of  
her  
>time-based magic, Pluto was capable of sheering off a section of the  
<br>universe from the flow of time. Now she was not alone in that  
  
>knowledge, as one other possessed it, and she too was a Senshi with  
the <br>magic to cast it.  
><br>From Pluto's personal perspective, no time would have passed  
from when  
>Saturn began to speak the words, to when the spell was released. To  
<br>Saturn, she was alone again, accompanied only by a perfect sphere  
  
>holding the temporally enclosed Sailor Pluto. Lina had done it  
again. <br>Just when Saturn believed that there was no recourse, that  
there was no  
>hope, Lina's heritage revealed yet another hidden layer.<br>  
  
>Knowledge of the Gates was protected by secrecy. Knowledge of how to  
<br>reach them was stolen from the world, hidden in Ranma's  
subconscious  
>until earlier that day when she released it. More dangerous than the  
<br>Gates themselves - for as with all Gates, they could be shut -  
were the  
>magical spells that took their power from the Gates. Spells such as  
the <br>Dark Dome Enclose whose very power strained the borders of  
reality  
>whenever it was cast.<br>  
>It was a terrible burden. Now Saturn understood what Lina had done  
and <br>why. With the power at her fingertips, she could rule the  
world. She  
>could do anything, be anywhere, and be undefeatable. By the nature

of  
their magic, these time spells took no time to cast. The mere  
stating  
of the words were retroactive, as was the building of the magic. It  
took a finite time to cast a Time Stop or Dark Dome, but they  
took  
effect instantly, a quirk of the fact that a successful spell must  
have been cast, and therefore it was impossible to interfere with  
the spell  
as it was being cast.  
Time travel hurt the head.  
Temptation hurt too. When Lina had sealed these spells inside her,  
she obviously knew what she was doing. No-one should be able to  
resist  
their temptation for as long as a Senshi might live. The chances to  
use such spells as these were too numerous to count. No accident  
need  
happen ever again, since Ranma now possessed the capability of  
preventing any misfortune from ever coming to pass.  
With a shaking hand, Saturn looked at the surface of the sphere  
that  
held Sailor Pluto captive. "How? How did you do it? All those years?  
All those centuries? How did you stay sane? How did you stop from  
doing  
what you could have done?"  
With grim certainty, Saturn knew that she could never achieve the  
same. She was mortal, she was human. Better than most, she was no  
stranger to  
desire and being able to resist it, but she could feel a gnawing  
dread that she would not be able to resist a fraction as long as  
Sailor Pluto  
had done. What sort of person could stand by and watch someone fight  
and be hurt when you knew you could bring instant victory against  
any  
foe?  
Sailor Pluto was who, but what sort of person was she? Saturn's  
respect for the ancient Senshi had risen immeasurably in just the  
few moments  
that she had access to the same magic as Pluto, but she could not  
understand the woman. How? How could she have guarded these  
infernal,  
tempting Gates all those millennia and not given in to  
temptation?  
A slight shift of position made Saturn again realise that it was not  
only her head that was hurting, it was her leg also. Looking down  
at  
her leg, Saturn gritted her teeth and pulled, setting the bone to  
straight. In the white, eerie silence that surrounded the Gates  
Of  
Time, a scream echoed, travelling infinite distances to nowhere.  
Given time, her leg would heal, and be none the worse for ware.  
Healing, revitalising Ki was already coursing through the damaged  
flesh  
and broken bone, helping to knit and mend, even as Senshi magic was  
healing in its own way. Full health was only days away.

With a start, Saturn wrenched her eyes away from the Gates. Some  
sort  
of insidious calling was enticing her to use the Gates, to go  
backwards just those few vital minutes and stop Pluto hurting



her, or even going  
>forward, accelerating time on her leg so that it would heal in  
minutes, <br>not days. She would be strong! She would resist!

><br>Flicking a glance at the sphere, Saturn cursed and began to pull  
herself to the Gates. She would not be strong and resist, guarding  
the <br>Gates for all time; she would do what she came here for in  
the first  
>place and end their menace. When she had left the normalcy of  
reality, <br>she had been set on sealing the Gates, preventing Pluto  
from ever  
>accessing that power. Within instants of her gaining the full power  
<br>associated with them, those thoughts had fled, leaving her  
thinking of  
>how she could try to stay sane while guarding them herself.<br>

>Realistically, there was no need, and Sailor Saturn knew that was  
the <br>one option that was truly open to her. She needed time to  
rest to heal  
>her leg, and that could best be gained waiting here, outside the  
normal <br>reality. If the desire to take advantage of the Gates was  
this strong  
>minutes after becoming their master, how would she fare days later  
when <br>her leg was healed?  
><br>Now close to the Gates, Sailor Saturn bowed her head and reached  
out a  
>white-gloved hand. Pressing slightly, she radiated magic and felt  
the <br>slight resistance that Lina's memory told her was the  
interface between  
>then and now. That infinitesimal barrier between past, present,  
future <br>and the never that the Gates resided in.  
><br>Opening her eyes, Sailor Saturn looked at the infinite capacity  
for  
>good, evil and power and began to chant.<br>  
>"Gate of Time,<br>"Anchor to all eras and doorway to all days:

>"Bestow the powers of the Gate unto my key.<br>"Grant unto me your  
powers!"  
><br>The very air began to throb and hum, and Saturn felt a massive  
power  
>begin to roll over her from within the Gate. This was not an  
<br>uncontrolled power, but instead the exact opposite. This was the  
creation of the very controls that held the Gates Of Time in check,  
<br>that sealed the time stream from the fissure they represented.  
For now,  
>Sailor Saturn was forging a new Key, a new access to the Gates Of  
Time.<br>  
>With a start, Saturn almost broke the spell as she felt the massive  
<br>magic beginning to affect something she never imagined possible.  
The  
>Silence Glaive, her weapon, supposedly immune to all magic, was  
<br>altering, changing, and growing into new powers. At the base of  
the  
>staff, the plain metal tip receded, and a ball of pure, flawless  
<br>Flourite appeared. A forth Talisman brought into creation by the  
power  
>of the Gates Of Time.<br>  
>In front of her, Saturn's modified Silence Glaive hovered waiting

for  
her. As much as it pained her, Sailor Saturn brought herself to a  
>standing position, balancing on her one good leg. With a hand made pale  
through fear of what she was doing - and to some degree shock from her  
>wound - Saturn took the Glaive. Within her hands, she could feel its  
new power, no longer as benign and innocent as her beloved Glaive used  
>to be, she would never be able to forget the power she now wielded.  
>Taking the business end of the Silence Glaive, now a second Key to the  
Gates Of Time, Saturn inserted the business end into the Gates and  
>again chanted.  
>"Key!"  
>"Become the chain of caution!"  
>"Under my power as a Guardian Of Time,"  
>"Let only two unbind what one has made safe..."  
>"SEAL!"  
>With a slight flash, the Gates Of Time sealed. So momentous a concept,  
so lightly expressed. In truth, the sealing was unspectacular. The  
Gates Of Time were a tool, designed for effect, not display, and like  
all good tools, they were designed to be safe. With the use of either  
of the Keys that now existed, she or Sailor Pluto could seal the Gates  
in an instant. However, only with their agreed cooperation could they  
together overcome the seal, freeing the Gates for use once more.

>Waiting the days necessary for her leg to heal was difficult and  
boring. While it was made easier by the fact that she was outside of  
time and therefore would arrive back at the same instant she left if  
she desired, that did nothing to make it any less boring. All  
Saturn  
had for company was a closed Gate, looking for all the world like a  
heavy wood and iron gate of ordinary manufacture. That Gate and the  
black ball that held Pluto cut off from the flow of time.

>Once her leg was healed and she was sure that she would be able to  
survive freeing the no-doubt enraged Senshi, Saturn readied herself.  
>With her modified Silence Glaive, she had a weapon the equal or  
superior of Pluto, and with her martial skills, victory was assured.  
>That was no reason to take chances, so Sailor Saturn was standing,  
braced and ready for action when she finally cancelled the spell.

>Following the action she had commenced before she was imprisoned in the  
spell, Pluto's staff crashed into the ground. Rather than rising again  
to fight on, Pluto sunk to her knees and gasped. Cautiously, Saturn  
watched her until she was sure the woman was not going to rise. Taking  
a step closer, she realised that the mighty, invincible Sailor Pluto  
was crying.  
>"What?... Are you all right?..."  
>"Don't touch me! Just stay away! You don't understand what you've

<br>done!"  
><br>"I do! I've sealed the Gates Of Time! From now on, only together  
can we  
>open them!"<br>  
>There was a flash of hopeless anger in Pluto's eyes, but all too  
soon, <br>that faded into grief again. "You've doomed us all. Only I  
can guard  
>the Gates... Only I..."<br>  
>Taking another step closer, Saturn started to reach out for the  
woman <br>shoulder when Pluto spoke harshly. "Just go. Leave me  
alone. Just...  
>Pray you realise what it is you have done before it is too late...  
Only <br>I..."  
><br>For a moment, Sailor Saturn debated staying. She did not want to  
  
>abandon the Senshi. Especially now that she realised what an  
incredible <br>job she had actually done guarding the Gates through  
the oppressive,  
>mind warping centuries. But Pluto did not want company, and she  
could <br>not make any trouble with the Gates if Saturn was absent.  
  
><br>Content that the danger was contained, and somehow wishing she  
could  
>have done more for her recently vanquished foe, Sailor Saturn nodded  
<br>once, and disappeared.  
><br>When she arrived back in normal time, she was again in the park.  
Soon  
>she was a normal girl on a normal day. Others may notice the change  
in <br>the appearance in the Silence Glaive, but no-one would ever  
know its  
>cause unless Sailor Pluto or Sailor Saturn revealed its secret.<br>  
  
>Both Sailors were old experts at keeping secrets.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>One thing Ranma had never appreciated before was the difference  
between <br>being rich, and knowing what to do with a lot of money.  
Ever since he  
>had lived with the Amazons, he had been rich. Rich in a purely  
monetary <br>sense, of course, since he had always been rich in  
spirit no matter  
>where he lived, thanks to his life with Akane. Now that he had some  
<br>more friends, he began to appreciate what could be done with  
money.  
><br>Money, he found, did not have to be spent ostentatiously. Being  
rich  
>was not necessarily about chandeliers in every room and a dozen  
<br>servants. Being rich and having style, that was what made the  
money  
>worthwhile. Somewhat to his surprise, Ranma had found that style was  
<br>something that Michiru and Haruka had in spades.  
><br>Ranma would have been perfectly happy sitting, camped around a  
fire,  
>nothing for a seat but the ground or a convenient log. No food but  
some <br>simple rice. Of course, now that he was here, there was  
nothing wrong  
>with have Rei over for dinner in much nicer surroundings. The  
Outer's <br>House, as everyone seemed to be calling it, was the  
perfect place for  
>entertaining, and Michiru certainly knew a lot more about dinner  
<br>parties than he did.

><br>Dinner, cooked by Michiru and Ranma, had been served at a large,  
>expensive wooden table. Soft candles had lit the meal, glittering  
off <br>the inlaid gilding of their chopsticks. The cushions were  
soft, the  
>music was softer, and the company was grand. Despite the quality of  
the <br>accoutrements, the company was what really made the meal.  
True, Haruka  
>and Michiru were there, but so was Rei, and that made all the  
<br>difference from Ranma's perspective.  
><br>At the end of the meal, they retreated to the living room, to  
share a  
>pair of couches. Demonstrating yet another of his hidden talents,  
Ranma <br>brought in a large block of ice, and proceeded to turn it  
into fine,  
>shaved ice deserts. Settling back on the couch with Rei, Ranma  
smiled <br>his thanks to his housemates. He could have taken Rei out  
to dinner,  
>but somehow the home-cooked touch made it special, and the two girls  
<br>had much more experience entertaining than he did.  
><br>Looking at the Rei reclining against Ranma's side, Michiru  
smiled and  
>moved closer to her own partner. "Well, Rei, do you have any plans  
for <br>the holidays?"  
><br>"Not really," Rei confided. "I've been spending so much time  
studying  
>for exams this week, there hasn't been time to think about it."<br>  
>"She's not kidding! I almost had to tie Ami-chan up just to stop her  
<br>from dragging Rei-chan to another study session tonight."  
><br>"Hey! Thursday's exam is very important!" Rei said with mock  
>indignation in her voice.<br>  
>Seeing no-one else was going to offer any suggestions for Rei's  
<br>holiday, Ranma spoke again. "Well... What do you think of a real  
>holiday? We could swim to China and visit a few old friends..."<br>  
>"China?!" The chorus was universal.<br>  
>"China? But isn't that were that crazy girl Shampoo lives?"<br>  
>"Shampoo's not crazy, Rei-chan. She was just a bit too enthusiastic.  
<br>Honestly, I'm sure she didn't know what she was doing."  
><br>Concerned that Ranma - and therefore Hotaru - might be planning  
on  
>visiting the woman that had nearly caused the end of the world,  
Haruka <br>leaned forwards. "Come on, Ranma. I don't think that's  
such a good  
>idea. After all, if she did that to you once, she might do it  
again."<br>  
>"Haruka's right. What if she poisoned your food again, Ranma? Who  
would <br>be able to save you this time?" Michiru's soft tones were  
cautious but  
>concerned.<br>  
>"Well, I... I'm sure Shampoo wouldn't do that again. After all,  
<br>Cologne-chan could have done something pretty nasty to her after  
what  
>happened. Besides, I was hoping Rei-chan would come with me. That

way <br>we could have a nice time hiking through the forest, seeing the sights,

>that sort of thing."<br>

>"Cologne? Wasn't she the old mummy that came and visited us just after <br>we adopted Hotaru?" Haruka queried.

><br>"Yes, dear. Did you know her, Ranma? We thought she must have been a

>friend of Shampoo's since she was from the same village. Oh! That <br>reminds me! We actually have a few cheques for you from her. I was not

>sure why, but she insisted on sending simply huge amounts of money to <br>us every month. All she said was that you came from the same village,

>and that made you sisters. Haruka and I were planning on putting them <br>into a bank account until you were old enough to go to university..."

><br>Michiru trailed away, looking sheepish. From the wistful tone of her

>voice, it was easy to recognise just how much she had longed for the <br>time she would spend with Hotaru, watching the child grow into a woman.

>It was a dead dream now, but she could still think about it.<br>

>Even as Ranma opened his mouth, Rei beat him to the punch. "Yeah! I <br>remember now! Cologne was Shampoo's grandmother or something. What

>makes you think we can trust her any more than we can trust Shampoo?"<br>

>That caught Ranma's attention, and he responded just a little sharply. <br>"I'd trust Cologne-chan more than I'd trust these two any day!..."

>Oops... Michiru, Haruka! I didn't really mean it that way, but it is <br>sort of true. It's just... Well, Cologne-chan is my oldest friend. I've

>known Cologne-chan her whole life. It wasn't until she was a grown <br>woman that I left the Amazons and started wandering around again."

><br>Michiru placed a hand over her mouth, eyes wide with surprise. "Ranma,

>I'm sorry. Sometimes it's difficult to remember just how old you really <br>are. Cologne-san seemed so... old... It's hard to think of her as being

>a close friend of yours."<br>

>"Well it's true."<br>

>Trying to gauge just how well her significant other could trust <br>Cologne, Rei kept probing. "How did you meet her? Did she think that

>you were another one of the little girls in the village like Chibi-Usa <br>did?"

><br>"Nope. I was her midwife."

><br>There was silence. "You mean... You helped the midwife when she had a

>baby?"<br>

>"No. I was her midwife. Like I said, I've known her since the day she <br>was born. I'll never forget the day she opened her pretty brown eyes

>and smiled up at me. She was so tiny then... Just a little bit smaller <br>than she is now."

><br>All around, incredulous stares confronted Ranma. "You... You were the

>midwife? But... But..."<br>

>Grabbing a handy glass of water, Ranma doused herself and drew her  
<br>small form to its full four-feet of height. "I'll have you know,  
Tenou

>Haruka-san that I am a full Mistress Healer of the Joketsuzoku  
<br>Amazons!"

><br>"This just gets weirder every minute, Ranma. I think you're  
going to

>have to count me in on this trip. Coming Michiru?"<br>

>"Of course! Do you think I could let you out of my sight with a  
couple <br>of young girls like Hotaru and Rei around to tempt you?"

><br>"Who said---"

><br>Speaking right over Ranma, Rei began to join in the enthusiasm.  
Now

>that she knew that the two older girls - both powerful Senshi -  
would <br>be coming with them, she was sure that there would be no  
danger to

>Ranma. If any of those Amazons tried something sneaky like Shampoo  
<br>did... Well... Mars Fire, Earth Shaking and Deep Submerge would  
surely

>end any arguments quickly.<br>

>\* \* \*<br>

>Hiking up the trail, sweat poured from her brow, and again the black  
<br>haired, normally housebound priestess cursed the small girl in  
front of

>her. Long ago - days in fact - Ranma had taken all of the girls'  
packs, <br>and was carrying them stacked on top of her own. The fact  
that Ranma

>still led the group, just burned in the difference between her and  
the <br>others.

><br>Rei and Michiru could not be considered couch-potatoes by any  
stretch,

>but Ranma was setting a pace in the rugged mountains that they could  
<br>barely meet. Haruka, larger, stronger, with longer legs and  
plenty of

>athletic experience was still hard pressed, and that bothered her  
more <br>than she cared to mention. She might have been able to take  
the

>indignity if Ranma had been sharing the baggage load with them, but  
<br>instead, she was carrying it all by herself.

><br>Worst of all was the fact that Ranma was travelling in his girl  
form.

>Since they were used to the name, everyone called the small girl  
<br>Hotaru, but the name did not seem to match the image they had of  
the

>girl. Until recently, Hotaru had seemed to be sick and weak. Now she  
<br>could cover twice the distance each day they did - she liked to  
run

>around a lot while they walked - carry the packs, and still be the  
only <br>one with energy left at the end of the day.

><br>When the Outers had suggested hiring a four-wheel drive from a  
nearby

>city, Hotaru had rejected the idea out of hand. In her eyes, it was  
bad <br>enough that they had skipped swimming from Japan to China,  
but to avoid

>all the walking? That was half the point of the journey. Hotaru had  
<br>been willing to forgo the walk from the shore to the mountains  
due to

>the time constraints of Rei's school break, but that was the limit

of <br>her flexibility on the subject.  
><br>Visiting Cologne and Shampoo - while the target of their journey  
- was  
>not the sole reason for it. Initially, Ranma had intended to spend  
the <br>time romantically walking through the mountains of her  
childhood with  
>Rei, but the inclusion of the Outers had surprisingly sweetened the  
<br>trip.  
><br>Rei was often tired from the walking, and not as prone to  
conversation  
>as Hotaru. This was the big advantage of having Michiru and Haruka  
<br>there. Once Rei was starting to puff heavily from walking up hill  
at  
>the same time as talking with the animated and enthusiastic girl,  
<br>Hotaru would skip back down the line to where the others walked.  
Four  
>days of hiking in the forest had given them a lot of time to talk  
about <br>themselves, and that meant more to the three than they had  
realised it  
>could.<br>  
>Despite their closeness for the last three months, they had never  
<br>really talked like one adult to another. After all, during the  
time  
>that their bonds of love formed, Hotaru was an infant or a child.  
Now <br>that she was grown and an adult (mentally if not physically),  
their  
>discussions varied, and it added depth to the feelings that she  
already <br>had.  
><br>The story that had most opened Hotaru up to real friendship was  
when  
>the Outers talked about the difficult time they had dealing with  
<br>themselves during their battles against the Death Busters. During  
that  
>time, all Hotaru had seen was her own, limited and often biased  
<br>observations. Now she was hearing it from a different point view,  
and  
>some of the actions made much more sense. In many ways, the fact  
that <br>two school girls could find the moral strength to make such  
hard  
>decisions raised her respect for them more than the revelation that  
<br>they had fought so hard. If the decision to risk people's lives  
had not  
>been so hard, these would not have been the people she had grown to  
<br>care for.  
><br>The Outers - and Rei - in turn learned almost the entire story  
of  
>Ranma's life. Some of it made them laugh; some made them gasp in  
awe. <br>All too often, the tragedy in his life made them cry, and  
they  
>understood that it was only Ranma's unflagging good will and sense  
of <br>hope and forgiveness that allowed him to be as sane and  
reasonable as  
>he was today. <br>  
>Secretly, Michiru and Haruka also hoped that that same sense of  
<br>forgiveness would someday extend to Setsuna. Ranma had adamantly  
  
>refused to tell them what he had done to her. Since the party at  
Rei's <br>house, they had not seen the Time Senshi for more than five  
minutes,  
>and she had not been in good humour at that time.<br>

>Cresting a last hill, Hotaru zipped up next to Rei, took her hand and <br>invited her to gaze down onto the Joketsuzoku village. From where they  
>stood, they could see the small village laid out before them like an  
<br>excessively detailed assembly of doll houses. Small figures walked  
>around, a stream burbled nearby, and in the distance, Hotaru could make  
<br>out the entrance to the valley of Jusenkyo. She pointed out everything  
>that she recognised aside from how to reach the cursed springs. Simply  
<br>being near them was danger enough. Hotaru had no intention of actually  
>taking her friends there or allowing them to visit by themselves.<br>  
>As they made their way down the side of the mountain to the valley that  
<br>sheltered the village, Hotaru regaled her friends with stories of what  
>life had been like. The parties, the games, the fighting and the fun; <br>nothing had been quite the same as Amazon life, no matter where she had  
>gone. One of the other things that ensured the Joketsuzoku would hold a  
<br>special place in her heart was the way she had been treated as an equal  
>there. No matter where she went, especially in the more "civilised"  
<br>countries, she was treated like a child. With the Amazons, she had been  
>a woman, regardless of her stature or appearance.<br>  
>As they approached the gates to the village, Hotaru was glad that she  
<br>had managed to convince Haruka to dress differently that morning.  
>Coming from Japan, the girls were well aware how men often looked down  
<br>on women; Hotaru had assured them that the sexism in an Amazon tribe  
>would open their eyes. Also, unless Haruka wanted to keep lifting her  
<br>shirt every two minutes to convince some young warrior that she was  
>really a girl, it would be well advised for her to dress in something  
<br>that... accentuated her feminine characteristics a little more.  
><br>Consequently, the group that appeared at the gates was a rather unusual  
>one. Haruka and Michiru were wearing similar outfits - colour coded, of  
<br>course. Each girl wore a bright, jungle patterned, one-piece swimsuits,  
>some tight safari shorts and big hiking boots. The ensemble would have  
<br>been uncomfortable if they had been forced to carry a pack, but since  
>Hotaru was taking care of that, the clothing was actually quite  
<br>comfortable in the constant heat of the day.  
><br>Rei wore a simple cotton shirt and shorts, also fighting off the heat.  
>Hotaru, on the other hand, wore a bold, lime green Amazon pants-suit  
<br>that she had mysteriously pulled out of her pack that morning. The thin  
>black slippers she wore should not have been enough to protect her feet  
<br>against the twigs and sharp rocks, but to all appearances, they worked  
>as well as the other's heavy boots. Equally, the delicate silk and fine  
<br>embroidery on the tight fitting green suit should have been ripped and



>torn after breaking ground through the bushes for them at times, but  
<br>Hotaru looked a child fashion model as she lead them up the sentry.  
><br>Hello, Hotaru began in the Joketsuzoku's dialect, subtly different  
>from the surrounding languages. We are here to see the Matriarch,  
<br>Cologne.  
><br>Needless to say, the sentry was confused. Obviously a child, the girl  
>was carrying a set of backpacks that was easily twice her height,  
<br>almost certainly containing everything for their whole party. Just as  
>strange was the fact that the girl was presenting herself as the  
<br>leader, when it was clear that there were at least two adults with her.  
>Thinking for a moment, the woman guarding the entrance to the village <br>decided that she must be a guide or something... Perhaps...  
><br>Ask the women what they want here.  
><br>Why not ask me yourself? They're with me, not the other way around.  
><br>Glowering, the sentry took a step forwards. Impertinent child! Your  
>mother should have taught you more respect for a warrior of the  
<br>Joketsuzoku before she sent you off here.  
><br>Concerned by the angry tones and aggressive movement, Rei leaned close  
>to her small, currently female boyfriend. "What are you saying to her?"<br>  
>Not sparing the time to answer Rei, Hotaru took a stride forward to  
<br>match the sentry and glared up at the much taller woman. You're the  
>one whose mother failed to teach respect! Are you too blind to  
<br>recognise my ceremonial dress? Don't you understand the significance of  
>this clothing?<br>  
>Startled for a moment, the sentry checked Hotaru's clothes again. What <br>she had initially taken to be simply an interesting choice of colours  
>suddenly made complete sense. Rather than being in maiden's pink or  
<br>warrior's blue, this suit was in the green of a healer. Equally, the  
>pattern of the stitching marked it as being more than an apprentice's. <br>The fine, intricate gold stitching was reserved for a full Mistress,  
>one of the rare, talented individuals that effectively ruled the  
<br>village through their wisdom and influence.  
><br>But... But... It's impossible... How could you even know?...

><br>Adopting an expression of benign wisdom and indifference that  
>unconsciously mirrored the one that Setsuna so often wore, Hotaru  
<br>smiled. There were few visitors to the village, and fewer people still  
>would know what the ceremonial dress looked like, let alone would be  
<br>able to make it. That is not something you need concern yourself with.  
>All you've got to do is take us to Cologne-chan and nothing's going to <br>happen.  
><br>The sentry bristled at the girl's aggressive, challenging tone,

but  
>slowly she retreated. Something was going on here, and the sentry did <br>not know what it was. There were no Mistress Healers away from the  
>village, and certainly there could be none as young as this, but... But <br>she was here for Cologne, and the fact that someone dressing as a  
>healer chose \_now\_ to come to the village was too unlikely to be  
<br>coincidence.  
><br>Your pardon, Mistress. I... Forgot myself. Please, come this way and  
>bring your servants.<br>  
>As the sentry turned and walked off, three concerned girls came up to <br>Hotaru and surrounded her. "What were you saying, Hotaru? What's going  
>on? Why are you snickering like that?"<br>  
>"Oh, nothing, nothing... She just asked me to come along and bring my <br>servants."  
><br>"SHE WHAT?!"  
><br>The way the shout echoed throughout the village caught everyone's  
>attention, and Rei had the good grace to blush. Grinning feebly, Rei <br>waved one to all of the concerned warrior women facing them and then  
>turned back to Hotaru. "What did you tell them about us, Ranma? I'll <br>make you so sorry if you embarrassed me in front of all these people!"  
><br>"Calm down, you tomboy! When I told her I was actually a healer, she  
>just figured you must have been my helper or something. Don't take it <br>personally, I'm a good boss and all, you know."  
><br>While Rei fumed impotently, Hotaru set off at a brisk pace, making the  
>Senshi follow her if they did not want to get lost. The sentry led them <br>though the village, and Hotaru marvelled at just how little it had  
>changed in the years, centuries, since she had been here. Many of the <br>buildings were unfamiliar, having been pulled down for bigger or better  
>houses, or even just changed for the sake of change sometimes. It was <br>not until they stopped in front of one particular house that Hotaru  
>sucked in her breath and realised just how familiar a building could <br>be.  
><br>"That... That used to be my house... I made it not long after I first  
>came here because I didn't want to live with the other young girls."<br>  
>Looking up at the simple, wooden structure, the three girls <br>accompanying her felt as though they had just been able to look into a  
>piece of Ranma's mind. Finally, they could see things that she had only <br>ever talked about before. Here was the house, the very same one, that  
>she had built. Which meant that must be the log that she had sat on <br>during her lessons, and off to the left would have be the competition  
>circle. It was like seeing the characters of a book come to life for <br>the first time.  
><br>Cologne... Cologne-chan still lives here? Hotaru's voice was

choked

>with emotion.<br>

>The Matriarch has always lived here. The sentry stressed her  
<br>leader's title, offended at the casual way this stranger  
neglected it.

><br>Not always... She was born over there... Three houses down that

>street. I..." Memories made Hotaru's eyes tear slightly, but when  
the <br>sentry opened the door leading to the house, Hotaru made  
herself

>follow. Having come so far, she could spend the rest of her time  
<br>reminiscing with her old friend.

><br>After Hotaru stepped through the entrance, the sentry blocked  
the way.

>"Only Healer. No foreigner." Her Japanese was broken, but  
sufficient. <br>

>Rei was tempted to argue - she was always tempted to argue with  
people <br>that crossed her - but Michiru's soft hand on her shoulder  
stopped her.

>"Don't worry, Rei-chan. Hotaru-chan knows better than to eat  
anything <br>she gets from strangers. And we're all just outside.  
We'll hear it if

>something happens in there."<br>

>"Humph! Eating food from strangers is not what I'm worried about.  
<br>It's the people she knows that worry me."

><br>"Michiru's right, Rei-chan." Haruka continued in a quiet voice.  
"I

>don't think we have to be too worried about Hotaru-chan. Especially  
if <br>you look at who's coming over this way."

><br>Looking over her shoulder where Haruka pointed, Rei's eyes  
narrowed in

>anger, then she relaxed slightly. She might like Shampoo's company  
as <br>much as a case of sunstroke, but if she was out here, she was  
not in

>there, working her wiles on the unreasonably kind and forgiving  
Ranma.<br>

>"Aiya! It Pervert Girl! What you do here?"<br>

>"Don't call me 'Pervert Girl', you bimbo! And it's no business of  
your <br>what we're doing."

><br>"This Shampoo Great-Grandmother house. Shampoo make her  
business, know

>if you making trouble."<br>

>"Us making trouble?!" Haruka burst out "You're the one that nearly  
got <br>everyone killed!"

><br>"What you say? Shampoo no even met you!"

><br>"No, you haven't, but I happen to be a very good friend of  
Hotaru-

>chan's. When you messed with Ranma's mind, you unleashed a... a  
demon. <br>Because of your... stupid, childish actions, you almost  
killed everyone

>I know and care about in the world!"<br>

>Looking slightly abashed, Shampoo placed a finger on her chin.

"Ahh... <br>So that what happen to Husband. Great Grandmother no say.  
She say: 'He

>alive, but Shampoo may no see for too too long time.'"<br>

>"And that didn't bother you? The fact that you might have hurt  
him?"<br>

>"But Shampoo no mean to! Shampoo sorry, Shampoo punished. What more  
you <br>want?"

><br>"Its not the fact that you put everyone in danger. It's the way

you did  
>it to someone you claimed to love. How can that be love, Shampoo?  
Love <br>is about sacrifice, not about wiping someone's mind so they  
\_think\_  
>they feel something for you."<br>  
>Their shouting might have continued much longer but for the presence  
of <br>another Healer coming out of Cologne's house. This one, unlike  
Hotaru,  
>looked close to Cologne's age, and seemed to be built entirely out  
of <br>wrinkles. Even her wrinkles had wrinkles on them. Aging  
gracefully was  
>definitely not in this woman's vocabulary.<br>  
>Seeing the village's current Mistress Healer, the sentry paled,  
<br>realising the noise that the girls had been making just outside  
the  
>Matriarch's hut. My apologies, Mistress Healer. I should not have  
<br>allowed them to make so much noise. I shall quiet them  
immediately!  
><br>Slowly, the old crone shook her head. Do not bother yourself.  
The  
>Matriarch will not be troubled by it any more.<br>  
>\* \* \*<br>  
>When Hotaru entered the house she had once called home, the number  
of <br>people who were in there surprised her. To judge by the robes  
that most  
>of them wore, this could almost be a complete conclave of the  
village <br>elders.  
><br>A frightening premonition cooled the blood in her veins as  
Hotaru made  
>her way through the crowd. The crowd was too quiet, too calm for  
what <br>she remembered a conclave to be. The old women, most set in  
their ways  
>and burdened with hidden agendas, should have been constantly  
screaming <br>at each other, trying to impress with bluster where  
logic and reason  
>failed. If that was insufficient, it was also considered good  
politics <br>to challenge your opponent and try to beat her into  
submission. Hotaru  
>smirked slightly as she remembered how Amazonian politics were ill  
<br>suited to the frail or weak of heart.  
><br>Finally making her way to the middle of the throng, Hotaru was  
faced  
>with the truth of the gathering. The elders were obviously gathered  
to <br>hold a last council with one of their own. A woman that looked  
as  
>though she would not be holding that position much longer.<br>  
>As the stir in the women finally broke through the inner circle,  
<br>Cologne rolled her weary head to look at the disturbance. What  
she saw  
>was enough to take her breath away, and it was only with great  
<br>difficulty that she was able to regain her equilibrium and try to  
wave  
>the girl away.<br>  
>Soap... Please... I never wanted you to see me like this.<br>  
  
>Despite the women all around, all ancient and venerated, Hotaru  
dropped <br>to her knees and took the thin and frail hand that  
Cologne was trying  
>to wave her away with. C-Cologne-chan... What... What happened to  
<br>you?

><br>Despite the illness that was obviously sapping her strength, Cologne  
>managed a brief smile. I got old. Some of us do that, you know.<br>

>No! You're not old. You can't be. We... We were running around  
<br>together just a few months ago.

><br>I wish... I wish I still could be. But... I haven't been too well

>lately.<br>

>Please, Cologne-chan. Don't do this. I know you'll be all right. You  
<br>have to be.

><br>We all have a limited time, Soap. My time is coming to an end. I

>didn't want you to have to see me like this, because that was why  
you <br>left us in the first place... But now that you're here, it  
means so

>much to me.<br>

>Gently taking the small woman in her arms as though she was made of  
the <br>most delicate china, Hotaru held her close and brushed away a  
tear that

>was sliding down Cologne's withered face. If... If I'd known you  
were <br>sick, I would have been here sooner, Cologne-chan. I'm  
sorry. I... I

>waited for Rei-chan and...<br>

>But you are here now. Cologne's voice got weaker as a series of  
<br>coughs wracked her body. I... I saw you as a little baby, and I  
was so

>worried. I am so sorry for what happened to you. Shampoo did not  
mean <br>any harm, you have to understand that. She's just too young  
to

>understand the consequences.<br>

>Knowing the guilt of her great granddaughter's actions must hurt  
more <br>than the failing of her ancient body. It's OK, Cologne-chan.  
I

>understand. I'm not angry, Cologne-chan. I could never be angry with  
<br>you. And I forgive Shampoo too. It was a mistake, but no-one is

>perfect.<br>

>Cologne placed a hand against Hotaru's face and breathed deeply for  
a <br>few moments. I once... fought someone who was perfect... By a

>stream... In a clearing... But I lost... To the one I loved.<br>

>Her own eyes filling with tears, Hotaru could not say anything.  
Cologne <br>knew she loved her, and that was enough. Hotaru could  
feel the old

>woman weakening in her arms when a sudden surge went through her  
body, <br>and the ancient Matriarch reached out and grabbed the hand  
of the woman

>who was going to be her successor. <br>

>Recognise her! Recognise her as my sister! With surprising strength,  
<br>she pulled the old woman closer. Recognise Soap Onna Rope! She  
left

>the village on training, but she was always... one... of...  
us...<br>

>The new Matriarch of the Joketsuzoku looked over at the head of the  
<br>small, dark haired girl that held the body. She did not know of  
anyone

>that fit the description Cologne just gave, but they would honour  
the <br>last wish of the passing Matriarch.

><br>First one, then soon others gathered in the room left. In time, only  
>Hotaru remained. As she felt the afternoon begin to change into  
<br>evening, she released Cologne, her one real tie back to the days of her  
>youth. To Hotaru, the time between losing Akane, and joining the  
<br>Amazons seemed nothing more than a heartbeat, and Cologne was a part of  
>that heart. The long separation had vanished the instant they were  
<br>reunited. All that she could hope was that one day, when she passed  
>from this world, Cologne too would be one of the many people she would  
<br>see.  
><br>When Hotaru left the building, she encountered a group of four silent  
>girls waiting for her. Dimly, she could remember Shampoo coming into  
<br>the room while she grieved. Giving Michiru and Haruka a weak smile,  
>Hotaru found herself held firmly by Rei. The priestess knew that losing  
<br>a loved one was never easy, and from everything she knew, Cologne was  
>one of Hotaru's closest friends, more like a daughter or sister than  
<br>any other sort of friend.  
><br>Whispering quietly into Hotaru's ear. "I don't think Shampoo knows  
>about your curse."<br>  
>"She wouldn't. Cologne would never have told her." Looking up, she  
<br>addressed Shampoo. "I'm sorry about what happened. But... I forgive  
>you. And I know Ranma forgives you too."<br>  
>Shampoo smiled and got a wistful look in her eyes. They could tell that  
<br>she understood she would never see Ranma again. She did not know  
>whether he was dead or alive, but her chances of marrying the man now  
<br>were the same either way.  
><br>Once again Rei whispered to her. "You aren't going to tell her?"  
  
><br>"No. It's be easier for her like this. She still has some of her  
>honour. If she thought I was alive, she would be bound to chase me  
<br>forever."  
><br>Standing up, she took Rei's hand and looked at the other two she had  
>travelled with. "Come on. Let's go back to Japan."<br>  
>"Let's go home. Together, as a family."<br>  
>---<br>End Of Epilogue  
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End  
file.